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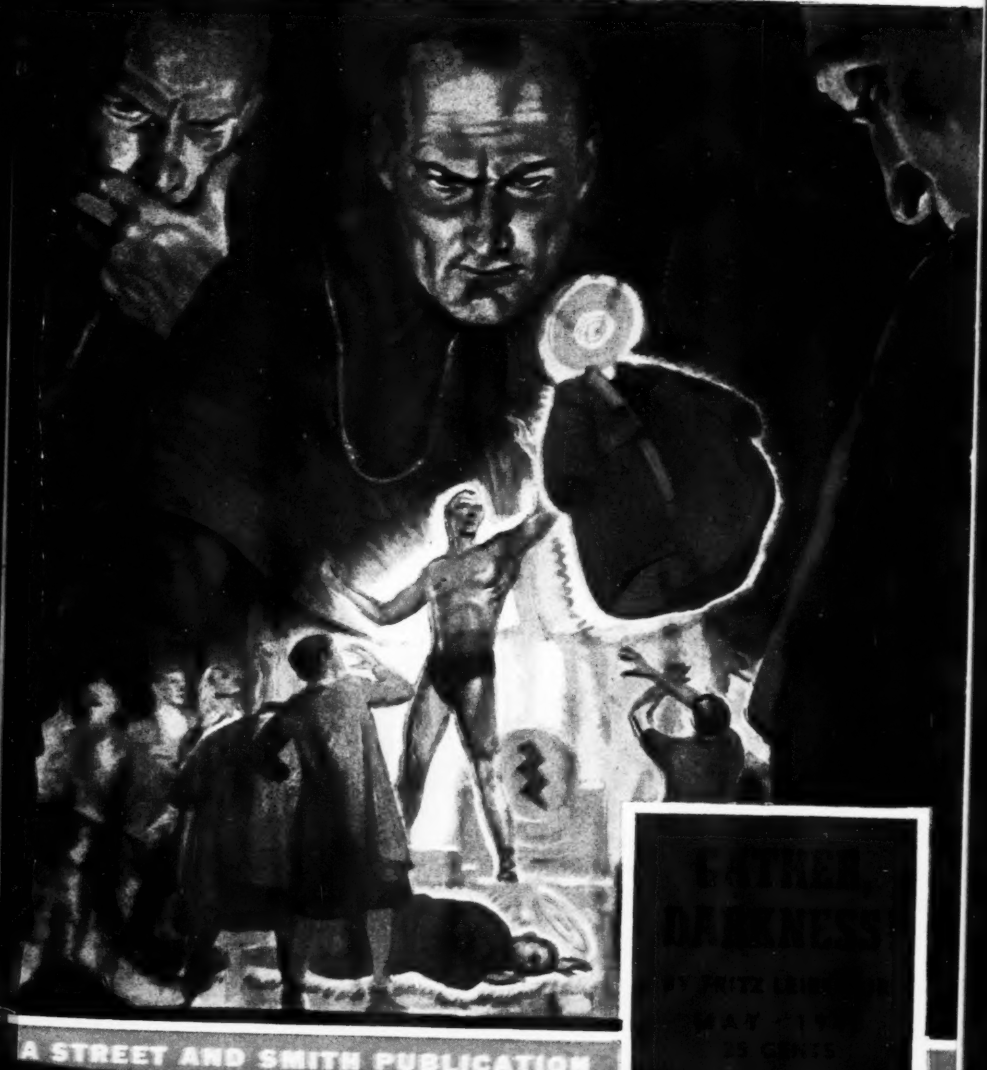

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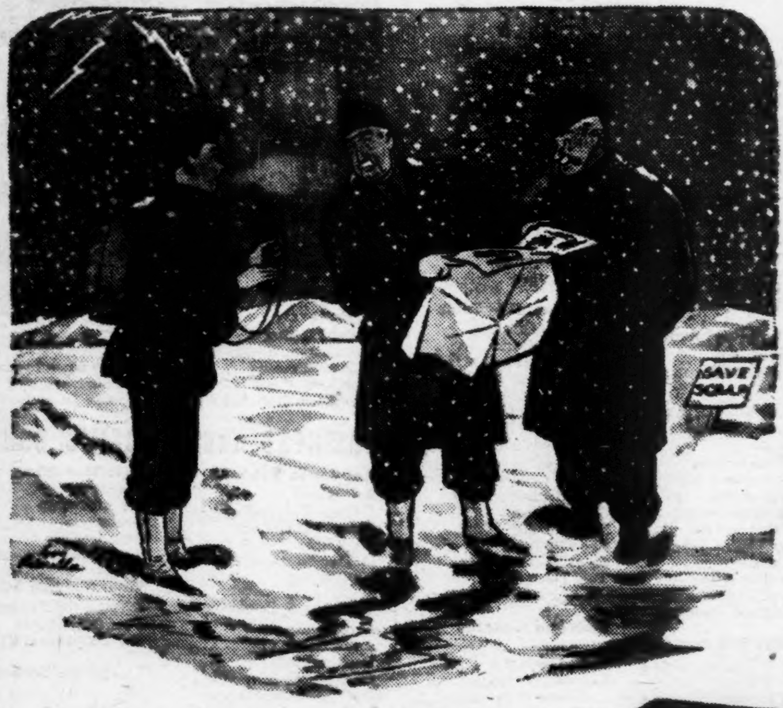

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Contents for May, 1943, Vol. XXXI, No. 3

John W. Campbell, Jr., Editor, Catherine Tarrant, Assistant Editor

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"—Wrap It Up—"

The science columns in Sunday newspapers, the popular science magazines, and the technical scientific journals continue to appear with all their old regularity. Since the middle of 1939, they have been composed of learned discussions of carefully selected unimportances. There hasn't been any real item of scientific discovery—save only in astronomy and kindred unearthly or inapplicable sciences—published in four years. It is practically a certainty that no real disclosures will be made in physics, chemistry, electronics—any of the industrial sciences—before the middle of 1945. Then there will begin a flood of science news that will have accumulated for six full years.

Six full years of scurrying behind the curtain, vague and mysterious rustlings and creakings, poundings and scrapings as the scenery is shifted for the next act. Shifted under the pressure of war-time demands, when the whole force of the world's technicians is applied to its utmost in reducing theoretical discovery to engineering practice.

Normally, a large force of the finest scientific minds is devoted to advancing theoretical science, while others work out the equally—and in some ways even more—intricate problem of reducing mathematical derivations to metallurgical devices. For the war period, practically the entire force has been devoted to the latter half of the problem. They've found things. They've done developmental work that would not have been done at all, in many instances. The synthetic rubber problem is a lot broader in scope than that designation implies; it's the problem of synthetic elastomers. The word "plastic" derives from the Greek word for bread dough—a plastic is a doughy, malleable material that can be formed at will, and baked, or otherwise treated, to form a more or less rigid mechanical structure. An elastomer is a synthetic substance that is plastic—malleable—in one stage, and can be treated to become an elastic material no longer subject to permanent deformation.

Inevitably, there have been dozens, scores, probably hundreds of false starts, sidetracks and wrong answers. A promising elastomer that, better than rubber when newly made, turns, on aging a week or so, to a queer sort of incredibly tacky goo. "Throw it out—that's no good, obviously. But—don't throw out the notes. That's going to be a magnificent flexible adhesive when we can develop it after the war." Or an experiment shows up a polymer which, decidedly not elastic, forms an opalescent white, very tough, solid material that melts sharply to a watery liquid at just below the boiling point of water. "Throw it out—but keep the notes. That's a lovely casting plastic. After the war we can probably develop it as a sort of nonmetallic solder."

And for every complete failure as an elastomer, they strike not-quite-right elastomers. The lack of tin cans is a sadly familiar phenomenon right now. They're packaging goods in glass bottles—they break, unless the glass is thick and heavy—paper, which isn't waterproof, and everything they can lay hands on. The civilian industries aren't getting it, but a lot of war goods is being packaged in some of those elastomers that don't compare with rubber—for some things. When you ship an airplane engine to Guadalcanal, it goes, perhaps, from subfreezing Connecticut, across equatorial waters, to tropical humidity. Crate it; sure, that gives mechanical protection. Wrap it up—but with what? No, that elastomer may not make good tires, but, unlike rubber, it won't soften if oil drips on it. And its waterproof, doesn't get brittle when cold, even humidity can't get through.

"Wrap it up" applies to more things than we ordinarily visualize; cans and glass and paper and synthetic plastics are all wrapping materials. But the method of packaging changes the whole nature of the problem. Water comes wrapped in steel pipes, usually. And plumbers are specialists in water-wrappings. There's a plastic pipe out now to replace that steel wrapper a frozen pipe can't burst, the pipe can't rust, you don't need expensive, machine-made angle connections, because the pipe bends.

Wrapping is going to be a lot different. And that's a very minor item of the scene-shifting back of the curtain. Wonder what'll be in those new wrappings?

Only the rattle of the wrappings has rather clearly been detectable from the other side of the curtain. But six solid years of high-pressure development is certainly going to spring something!

The Editor.

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by Fritz Leiber, Jr.

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Illustrated by Kramer

Brother Jarles, priest of the First and Outermost Circle, novice in the Hierarchy, swallowed hard against his churning anger; bent every effort to make his face a mask—not only to the Commoners, for that was something every member of the Hierarchy was taught to do—but to his brother priests as well.

Any priest who hated the Hierarchy as he did during these frightening spasms of rage, must be mad.

But priests could not go mad—at least, not without the Hierarchy knowing, as it knew of everything else.

A misfit then? But a priest was fitted to his job with infinite precision and foresight, the very outlines of his personality measured as if with an atomic probe. A priest could not hate his work.

No, he must be mad. And the Hierarchy must be concealing the fact from him, for its own inscrutable purposes.

Or else—everything to the contrary—he was *right*.

At the touch of that sickening thought, the Great Square of Megatheopolis seemed to haze and bloat before his eyes, like a moving solidograph out of focus. The Commoners became drab blurs. The priests here and there, scarlet ones, touched with the healthy pink of well-fed faces.

"Hamser Chohn, Commoner of the Fifth Ward! Stand forward, my son."

Brother Jarles winced. In moods like this, that reedy piping voice grated unendurably on him—as did every other characteristic and mannerism of Brother Chulian. Why had he been paired with Brother Chulian! Why, for that matter, must priests always work together—never alone, always by twos!

But he knew the reason. It was so they might watch each other, spy on each other, make detailed reports on each other. So that not the slightest action could be hidden. So that the Hierarchy would know of everything.

Fighting every instant to maintain the mask, he turned back. His eyes automatically dodged the fourth face in the queue of Commoners lined up before himself and Brother Chulian.

That fat, blue-eyed, soft-cheeked, shaven priest was consulting the Work Lists, which were printed in primitive style for the benefit of the Commoners, who did not know—and were not supposed to know—anything of reading tapes. Really, there was no reason to hate Brother Chulian especially. Just a rank-and-file priest of the Second Circle. Just a bloated baby.

But you could hate a bloated baby when he exercised over adult Commoners the powers of schoolmaster, minister, and parent.

Only one good thing—this particular job, so distasteful to Jarles, tickled Brother Chulian's sense of self-importance so much that he was willing to do it all by himself.

The little fat priest looked up from the Work Lists at the stalwart young Commoner nervously twisting a shapeless hat in big, horny hands, pausing every second to wipe one of them against a home-woven smock.

"My son," he piped benignly, "you are to work for the next three months in the mines. That will reduce your contribution to the Hierarchy to a mere half of your private earnings. You will report here to the appropriate deacon at dawn tomorrow. Hamser Dom!"

The young Commoner gulped, nodded twice, and quickly stepped aside.

Jarles' anger flared anew. The mines! Worse than the fields, or even the roads! Surely the man must know. And yet, when he had heard, he had looked *grateful*—that same fawning look the old books were always attributing to a faithful domestic animal of the genus Canis, now extinct.

Jarles wrenched his gaze away, again skipping the same face, now third in line. It was that of a woman.

And this time the Great Square of Megatheopolis, richly shadowed by the sinking sun, did not blur. But it did seem to waver and jerk with his anger, like a moving solidograph when the tapes are feeding unevenly. To master that anger and maintain the mask, to shut out what was happening beside him, he concentrated painfully on each detail. The crowd was thinning. Only the tail-ends of a few wards were still waiting to hear what the Work Lists held in store. Here and there smocked or bloused Commoners—the men in clumsy leggings, the women in heavy skirts—were gathering up the left-overs of homemade goods they had brought to barter or sell, loading them onto their own backs or those of small, burly mules, then trailing off across the Great Square into the narrow, cobbled streets of the Commoners' Section. Some wore broad-brimmed hats of a coarse felt. Others had already pulled up their hoods, although the chill of evening had not yet arrived.

Looking toward the Commoners' Section of Megatheopolis, Jarles was reminded of pictures he had seen of the cities of the Black Ages, or Middle Ages—or whatever that period Dawn Civilization had been called. Except that the houses here were mostly one-story and windowless, and everything was very neat and clean. Although he was only a priest of the First Circle, he knew that the resemblance was no coincidence. The Hierarchy did not tolerate coincidence. It had a reason for everything.

An old crone in ragged garments and a peaked hat hobbled past. The other Commoners drew away from her, with suspicious, apprehensive glances. A small boy yelled, "Mother Jujy! Witch! Witch!" shied a stone at her and raced off. But Jarles smiled at her faintly and raised his hand in greeting. And she smiled back—an unpleasant grimacing of wrinkled lips over toothless gums during which her hooked nose and jutting chin seemed about to meet. Then she was on her way again, feeling with her cane for secure places between the cobbles.

In the other direction, Megatheopolis was magically different. For there rose the gleaming buildings of the Sanctuary, topped by the incredible structure of the Cathedral, which fronted the Great Square.

Jarles looked up at the Great God, and for a moment felt fingering through his anger a touch of the same awe and reverence and pious fear that vast idol had used to awaken in him when he was only a Commoner's child—long before he had passed the tests and begun to learn the Secrets of the Priests. Could the Great God see his blasphemous rage, with those huge, searching, slightly frowning eyes? But such a superstitious fancy was unworthy even of a novice in the Hierarchy.

Without the Great God, the Cathedral was still a mighty structure of soaring columns and peaked windows tall as pine trees. But where one might expect a steeple or a pair of towers, began the figure of the Great God—the upper half of a gigantic human form, terrible in its dignity and serenity. It did not clash with the structure below, but was an integral and indisseverable part of it. The heavy folds of its drapery became the columns of the Cathedral, and it was built of the same smooth plastic.

From where it stood, it dominated all Megatheopolis, like some vast sphinx or unbelievable centaur. There was hardly an alley from which one could not glimpse the stern yet benignant face with the glowing nimbus of blue light.

And as for the Great Square immediately below, one felt that the Great God was minutely studying every pygmy creature that crossed it, as if he could at any moment reach down and pick one up for a closer scrutiny.

As if? Every Commoner knew there was no "as if" about it!

But that massive figure did not rouse in Jarles one atom of pride at the glory and grandeur of the Hierarchy and his great good fortune in having been chosen to become part of it. Instead, his anger thickened and tightened, becoming an intolerable shell about his emotions—as red and oppressive as the scarlet robe he wore.

"Sharlson Naurya!"

Jarles flinched at the name, chirruped by Brother Chulian. But now the moment had arrived, he realized he would have to look at her. Not to, would be cowardly. Every novice priest experienced great difficulties before he finally succeeded in breaking all emotional ties that linked him to the Commoners—to family and friends, and more than friends. Face the fact. Naurya could never mean anything to him.

Nor he to her, he realized with something of a shock as he quickly slewed his head around so that he was looking up into her face. For she did not seem to recognize him or take note of him, although, save for her robe and shaven pate, he was the same as ever. She stood there quietly, showing none of the cringing nervousness of the men who had gone before. Her hands, calloused by the loom, were folded at her waist. Her face, paler for the masses of dark hair, was without emotion—or else a better mask than his own.

Something—the way she threw her shoulders back—the air of hidden purpose sunk deep, deep in her green eyes, —thrust through the shell of his anger and caught at his heart.

"My little daughter, Naurya," Chulian cooed importantly, "I have good news for you. A great honor is yours. For the next six months you are to serve in the Sanctuary."

There was no change in her expression, no outward indication of her reaction, but it was a few seconds before she replied.

"It is too great an honor. I am unworthy. Such holy work is not for the likes of a simple weaver."

"That is true," said Chulian, judiciously, bobbing his chubby hairless head up and down within the stiff, funnellike scarlet collar of his robe. "But the Hierarchy may lift up whom it will, even from the ranks of the most humble. They have deemed you worthy for the holy work. Rejoice, my daughter. Rejoice."

Her voice was as quiet and grave as when she first replied. "But I am still unworthy. I know it in my heart. I cannot do it."

"Cannot, my daughter?" Abruptly Chulian's voice became querulously stern. "Do you mean 'will not'?"

Almost imperceptibly, Naurya nodded. The eyes of the Commoners behind her grew wide, and they stopped their nervous fumblings.

Brother Chulian's soft little mouth set in an implacable pouting frown. The Work Lists crackled loudly as he clenched them in his red-gloved hand.

"You understand what you are doing, daughter? You understand that you are disobeying a command of the Hierarchy, and of the Great God the Hierarchy serves?"

"I know in my heart that I am unworthy. I cannot."

But this time the nod was very definite. Again Jarles felt something catch inside his ribs.

Chulian bounced up from the bench he shared with Jarles. "No Commoner may question the judgments of the Hierarchy, for they are right! I sense more here than simple stubbornness, more even than sinful obstinancy. There is only one sort of Commoner who would fear to enter the Sanctuary when bidden. I sense—Witchcraft," he announced dramatically, and struck his chest with the flat of his hand. Instantly his scarlet robe ballooned out tautly, until it stood a hand's breath away from his body at every point. The effect was frighteningly grotesque, like some incredible scarlet pouter pigeon. And above his shaven head a violet halo glowed.

There was a sibilant hiss of terror, and the faces of the Commoners grew more pale. But Naurya only smiled very faintly, and her green eyes seemed to bore into Chulian.

"And that, once sensed, is easily discovered!" the swollen little priest continued triumphantly.

He stepped quickly forward. His puffy scarlet glove clutched at her shoulder without seeming quite to touch it, yet Jarles saw her bite her lips against sudden hurt. Then the scarlet glove flirted downward, ripping the heavy smock, so that the shoulder was uncovered.

There were three circular marks on the white skin. Two burned angry red. The other was rapidly becoming so.

Jarles thought that Chulian hesitated a moment and stared puzzlingly at them, before gathering himself and shrilling out, "Witchmarks! Witchmarks! Proof!"

Unsteadily Jarles got to his feet. His anger made him retch, a nauseating pressure. He slapped his own chest, felt the uniform inward pressure of the field at every point of his body, like a bath of warm wax; saw from the corner of his eye the gleam of his halo. Then he launched his fist at Chulian's neck.

The slow-looking blow did not seem to reach its mark, but Chulian tumbled down and rolled over twice. Even as he rolled, his robe stood out between him and the ground, as if he were inside a rubber ball.

Again Jarles slapped his own chest. His robe went limp and his halo vanished. And in that instant his anger exploded hotly, seeming almost to burn the mask of hypocrisy from his face.

Let them blast him! Let them blind and deafen him with excommunication! Let them drag him screaming to the crypts below the Sanctuary! The Hierarchy had seen fit to let him go mad without interfering. Very well, then! They would have a taste of his own madness!

Jarles sprang onto the bench and held up his hands for attention.

His voice was loud and hoarsely vibrant with anger at last unleashed.

"Commoners of Megatheopolis!"

That checked the beginnings of a panicky flight. Eyes turned to stare at him stupidly. They had not yet begun to comprehend what had just happened. But when a priest spoke, one listened.

"You have been taught that ignorance is good. I tell you it is evil!

"You have been taught that to think is evil. I tell you it is good!

"You have been told that it is your destiny to toil night and day, until your backs ache to breaking and your hands blister under the calluses. I tell you it is the destiny of all men to look for easier ways!

"You have let the priests rule your lives. I tell you that you must rule yourselves!

"You believe that the priests have supernatural powers. I tell you they have no powers you could not wield yourselves!

"You believe that the priests are chosen to serve the Great God and transmit his commands. But—if there is a god anywhere—each one of you, in his ignorant heart, knows more of him than the mightiest archpriest.

"You have been told that the Great God rules the universe—earth and sky. I tell you the Great God is a fake!"

Like whiplashes, the short, sharp sentences flicked into the corners of the Great Square, turned all eyes toward him. The words were not understood, except that they were very different from what the priests ever said. They frightened. They almost hurt. But they tugged irresistibly. Everywhere—even in the work queues—Commoners looked at the nearest priest, and getting no contradictory order, trotted over toward Jarles.

And Jarles now looked around him in bewilderment. He had expected to be silenced at once. His sole object had been to say as much as he could, or rather to let his anger say whatever it wanted to in its brief moment of freedom.

But the blow did not fall. No priest made a move toward him, or acted as if anything out of the ordinary were happening. Like some crazy dream, in which one transgresses all laws and conventions without rebuff or rebuke.

But even as he thought of that, his unquenched anger continued to speak for him.

"Commoners of Megatheopolis, what I am going to ask you to do is harder than you can ever imagine. Harder than work in the mines, though I won't ask you to lift a finger. I want you to listen to what I say, to weigh my words for the truth in them, to make a judgment as to the worth of what I tell you, and then to act on that judgment. You hardly know what all that means, but you must try to do it, nevertheless! To weigh my words for truth? That's to see how they square with what you've *seen* happen in your private lives—not what you've been *told*. To make a judgment? That's to decide whether you want something or not, after you've learned what it is. I know the priests have told you all that is wrong. Forget the priests! Forget I wear the scarlet robe. Think of me just as someone talking to you man to man, man to woman. And listen, listen!"

Now surely the blow must fall! They wouldn't let him say any more! Involuntarily he looked up at the form of the Great God. But that vast serene idol was taking no more notice of what was happening in the Square than a human being might take of a swarming of ants around a bit of sugar.

"You all know the story of the Golden Age," he was already saying, his voice now richly vibrant with secrets to unfold. "You hear it every time you go to the Cathedral. How the Great God gave divine powers to all men, so that they lived as in paradise, without toil or sorrow. How men grew restless and dissatisfied, wanting still more, and sinned in all manner of ways, and lived in vice and lechery. How the Great God in mercy restrained his anger, hoping that they would reform. How, in their evil pride, they finally sought to storm heaven itself and all its stars. Then, as the priests never weary of telling you, the Great God rose up in his wisdom and wrath, and winnowed out the few men who had not sinned against him and were still obedient to his holy laws. Them he made into his Hierarchy and gave them supernatural powers even greater than before. The rest—the sinful ones—he cast down and ground into the dust, and gave his Hierarchy power over them, so that those who had not of their own free wills lived virtuously would be made to do so by force! Then he further decreed that his Hierarchy select from each generation of men the naturally virtuous to be priests, and reject the rest, to toil in blissful ignorance under the gentle but inflexible guidance of the priests, who are the Hierarchy."

He paused, looked searchingly into the staring faces.

"That much, all of you know by heart. But not one of you dreams of the truth behind the story!"

Without anger whipping him on, Jarles might have stopped then and there and walked into the Sanctuary and down into the crypts, so stupid and uncomprehending were the Commoners' reactions, so obviously did they misinterpret every word. At first they had seemed only shocked and bewildered, though obedient as always. Then—when he had called upon them to think and judge—they had looked vaguely apprehensive, as if all this rigmarole were merely the introduction to some assignment of physical labor, literally harder than work in the mines. The story of the Golden Age had lulled them. It was something familiar. His last sentence had shattered the lull, and brought them again into that state of stupid, anxious gawking.

But what else could he expect? If he could only manage to plant the seeds of questioning in just *one* Commoner!

"There *was* a Golden Age. That much is true. Though as far as I know there was plenty of toil and sorrow in it. But at least all men had a little freedom, and were getting more. The getting of it meant trouble—lots of it—and at one point the scientists became frightened, and . . . but you don't even know what a scientist is, do you? Any more than you know what a doctor is, or a lawyer, or a judge, or a teacher, or a scholar, or a statesman, or an executive, or, so help me, an artist. Because the priests are all of those things. They've rolled all the professions, all the privileged classes into one. You don't rightly know even what a priest is! There were religions in those days, you see, and worship of a god—in the Golden Age and the long ages before it, ever since man fought his way up, with hands and brain, to mastery of this planet. But the priests of those religions dealt only in spiritual and moral matters—at least at such times as they were wise and good. Other work they left for other professions. And they didn't use force.

"But that's getting ahead of my story. I want to tell you about the scientists, and how the Golden Age ended. A scientist is a thinker. He's a thinker about *how* things happen. He *watches* things happen. Then if he knows a thing *can* happen, and if it's a thing men *want*, maybe he can figure out—by thinking and hard work—how to *help* it happen. No magic, see? No supernatural powers. Just watching, and thinking, and working. That's all there is to it."

He had forgotten to wonder why he had not been silenced. He thought only of how to choose the right words, how to say them, how to hammer or ease them home—anything to get a flicker out of those faces!

"The scientists of the Golden Age—only they called it the Atomic Age—became afraid that mankind was slipping back into barbarism and ignorance. I suppose it must have been, a little. At any rate, their position as members of a privileged profession was threatened. They decided that, for a time, they must take control of the world. They were not strong enough to do it directly. They weren't fighters. So they got the idea of establishing a new religion, modeled on the old religions, but *powered by science*. In the old religions, blessings and cursings referred to spiritual matters. They worked indirectly, through men's minds, in another realm altogether. In the religion the scientists established, blessings and cursings worked directly, by force!

"You want proof? You *should* want proof. Here it is!"

His hand whipped downward from collar to hem of his heavy, scarlet robe. A metal-edged slit appeared. He quickly stepped through it, bare except for a pair of scarlet trunks. Many of the Commoners shuddered and shrank back, wincing. To see a priest unrobed was blasphemous. True, the priest had done it himself. But somehow they might be to blame.

"You have been taught that Inviolability proceeds from the priest, a divine aura projected by his holy flesh and controlled by his will power. Watch!"

He slapped the breast of the empty robe smartly. Instantly it mushroomed outward. He pushed it away from him. It floated out and down from the bench. Commoners shoved wildly and clawed at each other, in their desire to avoid touching it or being touched by it.

It came to rest about two feet from the ground, jogging up and down gently, for all the world like a recumbent priest, complete even to the spuffed scarlet gloves—except that there was no gleaming shaven head under the eerily glowing violet halo which all men knew to be an emanation, an outward sign, of the priest's holy thoughts.

The panic-stricken ones regathered in a circle around it, at what they hoped was a safe and reverent distance, goggling in amazement and awe.

Jarles' voice was bitter as a medicine. "Maybe you can get to the Hierarchy's heaven the way that robe's trying to. I know of no other. Can't you see it's a trick? Rip open that robe"—a Commoner gaped horrifiedly at him for a moment, thinking the words a command—"and you'll find a network of fine wires. What does the Great God need with wire? They make what's called a bilateral, short-range, multipurpose repulsor field. Something that pushes, see? Something very useful for protecting a priest from injury and powering his flabby fingers so that they're stronger than those of a smith's. And it props up his halo! Stop gawking at it, you fools! It's just a trick, I tell you!"

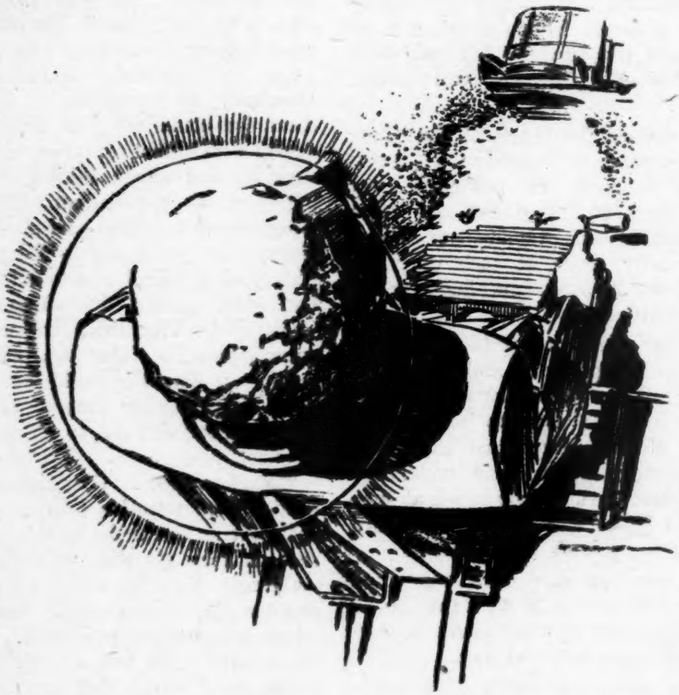
He mustn't get angry with them. He mustn't! But it was hard not to. They were such idiotic, credulous sheep. Not worth the trouble to—

"How do I know all this?" he fairly bellowed at them. "You *ought* to ask that question. Well—the priests told me! Yes, the priests! Do you know what happens to a young man when he passes the tests and is admitted to the Hierarchy as a novice?" That got them, he could tell. It took a racy question like that to whet their dull curiosity and awake a kind of brooding, cautious speculation. "A lot of things happen to him you don't know about. I'm just going to tell you one. He's told, gradually, in small doses—but unmistakably—that there is no Great God. That there are no supernatural powers. That the priests are scientists ruling the world for its own good. That it's his duty to help them and his good fortune to share in the benefits.

"Don't you see? The scheme of the Golden Age scientists worked. Their new religion swept the world. And as soon as they got the world firmly by the throat, they were able to mold it just the way they wanted. For themselves, they made a regimented, monastic paradise. To find a model for the Commoners' world, they went back to a time called the Middle Ages, and found a nice little thing called serfdom. Oh, they cleaned it up a bit, made it orderly and healthy, and added a few touches of downright slavery. But otherwise they didn't change it one jot. It was just what they'd been looking for. It suited them down to the ground. It was just the thing to keep a whole world in a state of frightened, ignorant, back-broken, grateful servitude.

"Sure, they averted barbarism. By establishing it!

"There was one very special wrinkle about the Middle Ages that you got a taste of today. My priestly educators haven't got around to telling me about it, but I can see the why and wherefore of it all right. Witchcraft! Don't cringe, you idiots! It's just another of their tricks, we can be sure. Some of the old religions had witchcraft mixed up with them, catering to the cheapest superstitions and fears. The scientists decided their religion ought to have a witchcraft, too. So they let scatter-brained old women like Mother Jujy go around pretending to tell fortunes, cast spells, and brew love potions. Just the thing to strengthen superstition and give Commoners a bit of an outlet. And a marvelous straw man to knock down with their scientific exorcisms. Besides providing a neat excuse for getting at people they don't like, such as that girl you saw accused today."



He looked around for Sharlson Naurya, but could not find her in the crowd. Or Brother Chulian. It was getting dim. The small white sea of faces was beginning to smudge a little. He realized, with a start, that the sun had set. A chill breeze was trickling down from the hillside farmlands, making him shiver in his nakedness.

And still the Hierarchy held its hand. Round about the Square priests stood by twos, watching, doing nothing—wine-dark shadows.

But he fancied he saw a trace of something more than ignorant curiosity and bewildered awe in two or three of the white faces spread out before him. And, as a man in polar snows nurses the tiny flame that is all that stands between him and death by cold—cupping his hands around it, breathing upon it with infinite gentleness, shredding upon it tiny crumbs of tinder—so Jarles nursed that trace of genuine understanding he fancied he saw, but which might only be a trick of the shadows.

"Some of you heard why Sharlson Naurya was accused of Witchcraft. She was ordered to serve in the Sanctuary and refused. Refused with courage and simple decency. So a priest of the Great God reached forward those chubby, uncalloused fingers stronger than a smith's and made witchmarks on her shoulder before he ripped down her smock.

"All of you must guess why Sharlson Naurya refused. All of you know who lives there." He pointed down a dark little street next to the Sanctuary. Eyes followed his finger. "Fallen Sisters, they're called. Girls chosen by the Hierarchy for the holy sisterhoods, who then so sinned against the Great God that they could neither be suffered to remain in the Sanctuary nor permitted to return home to infect the innocent. So the Great God in his infinite mercy gives them a place where they may live apart." His voice was thick with irony. "You know! Some of you have been there yourselves, when the priests would tolerate it."

At that, the faintest of mutterings came from the crowd—the throaty, almost inaudible growl of a beast that has been beaten and starved in servitude all its life, yet retains a spark of the free, primeval wild. Remorselessly then, he hammered his points home.

"Who takes your sweetest daughters for the sisterhoods, Commoners of Megatheopolis?

"Who takes your best and cleverest sons, to be torn from you utterly, to be turned against you, to be made your oppressors?

"Who takes in tithes half—yes, two thirds!—of what you earn by sweat?

"Who sends you to the fields, the roads, the mines, to waste your years and break your backs?

"Who gives you sweet words and honeyed music to lull the aching?

"Who gives you fake thrills to deaden the pain?"

And now the muttering had become an angry murmuring. Stone-blind resentment, except perhaps in two or three cases, but dangerous. Around the edges of the Square violet will-o'-the-wisps began to glow, and there was a peculiar shifting—a slight bulging—of the wine-dark shadows. Jarles instantly caught at it.

"See them switch on their Inviolability! Puff themselves up for safety. They're afraid of you, Commoners of Megatheopolis. Deadly afraid.

"Those of you who've worked in the fields—and most of you have—know what I mean by the Red Rust. It happens in *your* fields, not in the gorgeous, hothouse acres of the Hierarchy. Millions of fat little red spiders, eating at the underside of everything green, leaving it yellow and dead.

"That's what the priests are. Bloated, scarlet parasites.

"You know what you do to those spiders."

And now there was an odd agitation in the crowd, a seemingly purposeless surging.

"With their holy gadgets the priests could farm the whole world, web it with perfect roads, honeycomb it with mines. And not one man lift pick or spade.

"There's another story you're told. How, when the Hierarchy has finally purified all mankind, the Great God will usher in another Golden Age, the New Golden Age, the Golden Age Without Dross.

"I ask you—and especially the old ones among you—doesn't the New Golden Age get further and further away every year? Don't the priests keep pushing it further and further into the future? Until now it's only a hazy dream, something to lull your little children to sleep with when they're half dead from their first day's work and crying?

"Maybe those Golden Age scientists

did intend to restore mankind, when the threat of barbarism was finally past. I guess they did.

"But now the priests think only one thing—one thing alone! How to hold on to their power as long as mankind lasts—until the sun darkens and the earth freezes!"

Then he realized that the muttering had died to dead silence, and they were no longer looking at him, but upward. An eerie, leaden blue light was illuminating their faces, until they looked like a crowd of drowned men. And this time his eyes followed theirs.

The Great God had leaned forward, blotting out the first, faint evening stars, until his gigantic face was peering straight down at them, his blue nimbus blazing in all its deathly glory.

"Behold their greatest trick!" Jarles shouted. "The Incarnate God! The Almighty Automaton!"

But they were not listening to him, and now that he had stopped speaking his teeth were chattering from the cold. He hugged his arms to stop the shivering, alone on his little bench that now seemed very low.

"It has come," the Commoners were thinking. "It was all a test, as we might have known. Unfair—except the priests are never, never unfair. We should not have listened. We should not have been moved. And now we are to be blasted for our sin, for the Greatest Sin—to think a thought against the Hierarchy."

The hand of the Great God thrust downward, like a falling steeple checked in midair. The extended index finger, thick as a tree trunk, pointed at the puffed robe Jarles had cast aside, and which still hung two feet above the ground.

Crackling, coruscating blue light snaked from nimbus to mountainous shoulder and down the arm, spat like lightning from the fingertips. The empty robe glowed, frizzled, puffed a little more, then burst with a hollow pop, like a seaweed bladder in a fire.

That sound, and the spatter of red-hot fragments, thawed the frozen panic. The crowd broke, began to race toward the narrow, dark mouths of the streets—any street, it made no difference, so long as they got out of the Square.

The crackling beam moved slowly toward the bench on which Jarles still stood, fusing the cobblestones, leaving a red-hot trough in its wake—a sign and mark for all times to come of its divine wrath.

He waited for it.

There was a swooping of blackness, a beat as of gigantic shadowy wings. And then around the renegade priest had closed an irregular sphere—mottled with blackness, inkily smeared, so that through it his naked body was still vaguely visible.

And the irregular sphere had the form of two great hornily clawed hands, cupped together.

The blue beam moved swiftly then, impinged upon the sphere, crackled against it, showering blue sparks.

The sphere drank the beam, and grew not one whit less black.

The beam thickened to a writhing pillar of blue light, turning the Great Square to day and driving back the air in hot, breathless waves.

And still it only spattered harmlessly against the black-streaked, irregular sphere of the cupped hands.

It was still possible to glimpse the form of the renegade priest inside them, like an insect miraculously alive in the heart of a flame. He seemed to be groping around uncertainly.

Then a great, evilly mirthful voice that shook the ground, that seemed to blow the hot air from the Square in one breath, that stopped every fleeing Commoner in his tracks and turned him around to stare in paralyzed terror at the black and flaming spectacle.

"The Lord of Evil defies the Great God!

"The Lord of Evil takes this man for his own."

The cupped hands jerked away, upward, off, and out of sight.

Then gales of satanic laughter that seemed to rock the Sanctuary itself.

II.

"Brother Jarles, your resplendent archpriestship, has begun to harangue the crowd in the Great Square."

"Good! Send the reports in to me at the Apex Council as soon as he is finished—and has been finished—off!"

Brother Goniface, priest of the Seventh Circle, archpriest, chief voice of the Realists in the Apex Council, smiled—but the smile was not apparent in the pale, lionlike mask of his face. He had touched off the fuse of a bomb that would blast the Apex Council out of its complacency—both the Moderates, with their wishful thinking and flabby compromises, and his own Realists, with their mulish conservatism and their touching faith in the efficacy of long-established procedures to deal with any emergency.

His dangerous little experiment was running now and couldn't very well be stopped, let Brother Frejeris and the rest of the Moderates yelp as much as they wanted to—afterward.

For afterward everything would be neatly finished off. Brother Jarles would be dead, frizzled by the Great God's wrath—an instructive example for the Commoners and any other dissatisfied young priests. And Goniface would be able to explain at leisure to the Apex Council just how much vital information had been gained by study of the artificial crisis he had fomented.

Only at times like this did a man really live! To have power was good. To use it as he was doing now, dangerously, was better.

But to use it in fighting an enemy perhaps as strong as yourself was best of all.

Goniface believed that the Hierarchy had such an enemy. And today's events should go far to convincing the rest of the Apex Council.

He adjusted his gold-worked scarlet robe, commanded the great doors to open, and strode into the Council Chamber.

At the far end of the vast, pearly room, on an extensive dais, was a long table, with every seat behind it occupied by a gorgeously robed archpriest—every seat save one.

Goniface relished that long walk the length of the Council Chamber, with all the rest of them already in place. He liked to know that they were watching him every step of the way, hoping he would stumble slightly or scuff the floor, just once.

Liked to know it, and then forget it!

For that long walk up the Council Chamber under those critical eyes gave Goniface something that no other archpriest seemed quite to understand. Something that he would not have allowed excitement over a dozen Jarleses to rob him of. An opportunity to drink in, at its richest and most tense, the power and glory of the Hierarchy—stablest government the world had ever known. The only government fully worth a strong man's effort to maintain and to dominate it. Built on a thousand lies—like all governments, thought Goniface—yet perfectly adapted to solve the intricate problems of human society. And so constituted, by virtue of its rigid social stratification, that the more a member of the priestly elite struggled for power in it, the more closely did he identify himself with the aims and welfare of that elite.

At times like these Brother Goniface became a visionary. But solely by the power of his imagination and his neurons—no clairvoyant nonsense!

He could look through the soaring, softly pearl-gray walls of the Council Chamber, and watch the busy, efficient working of the Sanctuary—sense its intricate manifold relationships, its uninterrupted hum of intellectual and executive activity, its subtle pleasures. Then outward, past the limits of the Sanctuary, across the checkerboard of neatly tilled fields, around the curve of the Earth, to where rose the gleaming walls of other sanctuaries—the rural ones simple and modest hermitages, the urban ones each with its cathedral and Almighty Automaton brooding over a great square. And still farther than that, across blue oceans, to other continents and gorgeous tropical islands. And everywhere to see in vision and sense with a pleasure-beyond-pleasure the workings of the Scarlet Robe—from the lamasaries clinging unshakably to the titan Himalayas, to the snug stations buried deep in Antarctica. Everywhere the sanctuaries, webbing the whole world, like the nerve-centers or ganglia of some globular marine organism, floating in the sea of space.

And then even beyond that—to heaven itself!

After he had walked a little more than halfway, his imagination began its return journey. Usually this was signalized by Brother Frejeris dropping his statuesque pose and beginning to shift about impatiently. Wouldn't Brother Frejeris—and the whole pack of them—be woefully surprised if they should ever learn that, at these times, Goniface was not worrying about their scrutiny at all, but indulging in a kind of meditation, from which he sucked the power and foresight that made him greater then any of them! And under circumstances when—reason be praised!—they could not speak to him and interrupt his train of thought.

But they would never learn that. Any more than they would ever penetrate the secret of Brother Goniface's past, which seemed to him at times the greatest, though also the darkest, jest in all creation.

Back sped his vision. And now it followed the lines of the social pyramid, or cone. First the broad base of Commoners—that necessary, bestial, almost mindless substratum. Then a thin layer of deacons—insulation. Then the novices and rank and file of the first two circles of the priesthood, accounting for more than seven eighths of the scarlet robes. Then, the cone swiftly narrowing, the various higher circles, each with its special domain of interest and endeavor, until the small Seventh Circle of major executives was reached.

And, on top of all, the archpriests and the Apex Council.

And, whether they knew it or not, himself on top of that!

He slipped into his seat and asked, although he knew the answer, "What business today?"

"That, so please your archpriestships," came the well-modulated voice of a Second Circle clerk, "which you have asked me to refer to as the matter of the Frightened Priests."

Goniface sensed a reaction of annoyance ripple along the Council Table. This was one of those fantastic matters that refused to adjust themselves to established procedures, and were, therefore, exceedingly vexing to conservative mentalities. For two days running the Apex Council had postponed dealing with it.

That it was a highly significant matter as well as a fantastic one, Goniface hoped to convince the others. But he must not give away his hand by showing too much interest too soon.

He looked around inquiringly. A bluish shadow, which the closest shaving could not quite eradicate from his head and cheek and chin, increased the impression of virility and self-confident mastery. He seemed the youngest of them all, yet there was immediately apparent in their attitude toward him a certain profound respect, mingled with watchfulness and even fear. As if they were perpetually uncertain what his next move would be, yet convinced that, whatever it was, it would dominate the business of the Council. As if they were hoping that he would overreach himself and lay himself open to attack, and yet as if, at the same time, they were troubled by a desire to submit themselves entirely to his will. As if they suspected him of seeking to establish a tyranny—and wondered if it would not be best if he did! In short, a strongly ambivalent attitude, most marked in the Moderate opposition, yet apparent even in his stanchest Realist supporters—men of great power and character, like Jomald, Genchanin, and a half dozen others. The attitude that a conservative ruling body invariably takes toward an individual who has skyrocketed to power by a mixture of ingenuity, daring, shrew radicalism, and a stubborn strength even greater than their own.

"What do you say, Brothers?" he proposed in easy, casual tones. "Shall we have our country relations in all together? Shame them by making them listen to each others' childish-seeming tales?"

"That is hardly in accord with the best psychological practices," observed Brother Frejeris, his voice like the middle notes of an organ for beauty and strength. "We then encourage mass hysteria."

Goniface nodded politely, remarking, "You dignify their condition, Brother, with a high-sounding term," and again looked up and down the table, questioningly.

"Have them in together," urged a trans-ocean representative. "Else we'll be here all night."

Goniface glanced toward the senior member, lean Brother Sercival, whose white hair, shaven perhaps yesterday, still gave a silvery suggestion to his parchment skull.

"Together!" voted Brother Sercival through thin lips, ever stingy with words, the old Fanatic!

At that there was general agreement.

"A trifle of no importance," murmured Brother Frejeris, waving the matter aside with a sculpturesque white hand. "I merely sought to avoid a situation which may prove confusing to those of you who are not trained psychologists."

A clerk transmitted the necessary orders.

As they waited, Brother Frejeris glanced down into his lap. "I am informed," he said, very casually, "that there is a disturbance in the Great Square."

Goniface did not look at him.

"If it is of any consequence," he remarked smoothly, "our servant Cousin Deth will inform us."

"*Your* servant, Brother," Frejeris corrected, with equal smoothness.

Goniface made no reply.

About a score of priests were ushered in through the side door. Superficially they seemed identical with the priests of Megatheopolis Sanctuary, but to the members of the Apex Council, their every mannerism and gesture, the way they wore their robes and the precise cut of those robes, spelled "country."

They stood before the Council Table, an abashed and very much impressed clump of men.

Their numbers merely emphasized the lustrous gray vastness of the Council Chamber.

"Your reverend archpriestships," began a gnarly fellow, who seemed to have absorbed something of the earthiness of the endless tilled fields, without working in them.

"Surely you must know we have no time for preliminaries." It was Frejeris who cut him short. "Tell your stories. Briefly. You begin."

And he indicated the priest who had presumed to act as spokesman.

The fellow was taken aback. "I know what I'm going to say must seem very unreal here at Megatheopolis," he began haltingly, his eyes tracing upward the vaulting of the walls until it was lost in the misty ceiling, "—here at Megatheopolis, where you can turn night into day if you want to. It's different where we come from, where night edges up and clamps down, and you feel the silence creep in from the fields and grab the town—"

"No preliminaries, man! The story!" interjected Frejeris.

"Story!" snapped Sercival.

"Well, it's . . . it's wolves," the vaguely gnarly fellow said, with almost a touch of defiance. "I know there aren't any such things, except in the old books. But at night, we see them. Gray, smoky ones, like these walls, big as horses, with red eyes. They come loping, packs of them, like banks of mist, over the fields, and come skulking into town, circling around the Sanctuary. And whenever a pair of us must go out at night, they follow. Not doing anything more. Just follow. The Finger of Wrath can't hurt them—or the Rod! They just back away from the light it makes and skulk in the shadows. I tell you, your reverences, our Commoners are crazy with fear, and the novices are almost as bad. And then, at night, in the cells, something squats on our chests!"

"I know!" interrupted another country priest excitedly. "Cold furry things that twitch at the clothes and softly feel your face. And they squat there, light as down, while you don't know whether you're waking or dreaming, and they nuzzle you, and chatter at you in their thin high voices, saying the most abominable things, which you hardly dare repeat. But when the light's on, they're never there. They can touch you, but you can't touch them. Cold, skinny things, all covered with a fine fur or hair—that has a *human* touch to it!"

A third of the country priests, a sallow, high-foreheaded fellow with the look of a schoolmaster, had grown yet more pale at this last recital. "That's exactly how it felt!" he cried out nervously, his eyes fixed on something far away. "Brother Galjwin and I had gone to search the house of a Commoner whom we suspected of having concealed a portion of his weavings, on which tithes were due the Hierarchy. They were a bad lot, the daughter the worst—a shameless hussy! But I was on to their tricks, and pretty soon I spotted a loose board in the wall. I pulled it out, and stuck my arm through and felt around behind. That red-haired hussy was grinning at me in the nastiest, most disrespectful way. I felt a roll of cloth with a heavy nap, and reached in farther, so I could get my fingers around it and pull it out. And then it came alive! It moved. It wriggled! Cold, furry, but *human* feeling, just like he said—though the space back there wasn't four inches wide! We had that inside wall torn down, and we watched the crack until it was. Nothing came out. But we found nothing. We gave the household an extra stint of weaving, as penance. We found witchmarks on the daughter, got a special dispensation, and had her sent to the mines with the men.

"One thing I'll never forget. When I jerked my hand out, there were two tiny hairs caught in the jag of a nail—two tiny hairs of the same angry, coppery shade as the girl's!

"And now, when I sleep badly, I keep feeling the thing. Thin spidery arms against my palm—wriggling!"

And now all tongues were unloosed, and there was a frightened babble. One voice, louder than the rest, exclaimed, "They say it's those things that make the witchmarks!"

A gorgeously robed archpriest laughed melodiously, contemptuously. But there was something a little hollow about the laughter.

Brother Frejeris smiled and arched his eyebrows eloquently, as if to say, "Mass hysteria. I warned you."

"I said it would all seem very unreal here at Megatheopolis," asserted the first speaker, apologetically, yet still with a shade of stubborn defiance. "But there was a Fifth Circle priest sent down to investigate when we made our first reports. He saw what we saw. He didn't say anything. Next day he went away. If he found out anything, we haven't heard about it."

"We expect the Hierarchy to protect us!"

"We want to know what the Hierarchy's going to do!"

"They say," broke in the fellow who had mentioned witchmarks, "that there's a Black Apex, just as there's an Apex Council, so please your reverences! And a Black Hierarchy, organized as we are, but serving Sathanas, Lord of Evil!"

"Yes," echoed the first speaker, the vaguely gnarly one, and there was something solid and naked and earthy about the words he spoke. "And I want to know this! What if our centuries of pretending that there's a real god have somehow—I don't know how—awakened a real devil? What then?"

Goniface sat up and spoke into the shiver that followed those words. His voice lacked Frejeris' music, but it had its own stony, gray compellingness.

"Silence! Or you *will* wake a real devil. The devil or our wrath!"

In the silence he looked up and down the table. "What to do with these fools?" he asked lightly.

"Whip them!" snapped Sercival, lean jaw like a trap, small eyes glittering in their leathery sockets. "Whip them! For being such cowards in the face of the wiles of Sathanas!"

The country priests stirred uneasily. Frejeris rolled his eyes upward, as if such a statement were almost unbearably barbarous. But Goniface nodded politely, though not indicating agreement. He casually wondered to what degree old Sercival and the other Fanatics actually believed in the real existence of the Great God and his eternal adversary, Sathanas, Lord of Evil. Largely a pose, of course, but there was probably a substratum of genuineness. Not stemming from the ignorant superstitions of the Commoners—those were wiped out in the First and Second Circle, or else a priest got no further—but from a kind of self-hypnosis induced by years of contemplating the stupendous powers of the Hierarchy, until those powers actually took on a supernatural tinge. Luckily, Fanatics were very rare—hardly worth calling a party. Only one on the Apex Council, and he only become one in his senility. Even at that, the old fool might some day prove useful. He was grim and bloody-minded enough, and would serve as a convenient scapegoat if it were ever necessary to employ extreme violence. The Fanatic Party, for that matter, was useful in counterbalancing the more numerous minority of Moderates, leaving Goniface's Realists in almost complete control.

But these poor country priests were not Fanatics. Far from it. If they had even a shadow of belief in the Great God—in any god—they wouldn't be so scared. Goniface rose to reprimand them.

But there was an interruption. The high doors at the other end of the Chamber opened. A priest darted in. Goniface recognized one of Frejeris' Moderates.

The newcomer's progress toward the Council Table was nothing stately. He was almost running, like some messenger of crisis or catastrophe.

Goniface waited. Things were breaking fast now. But why give the impression he was trying to cover up something? In as stable an organization as the Hierarchy it almost never paid to rush an opponent, if only because it gave him less opportunity to make mistakes.

The newcomer, breathing a little hard from the unaccustomed exertion, handed something to Frejeris which the latter quickly scanned. So Frejeris suspected that the televisors were being tapped, and was using runners. Not so foolish at that.

Frejeris rose and spoke to Goniface directly, for the whole table to hear.

"I am informed that a First Circle priest is blaspheming the Hierarchy before a large crowd in the Great Square! *Your* servant Cousin Deth has taken charge and forbids interference. I demand you instantly explain to the Council what this madness means!"

"Who fosters mass hysteria now, Brother?" Goniface countered quickly. "Your information is incomplete. Shall I explain a subtle stratagem before those who would not understand it?" He indicated the country priests. "Or shall I finish the business before the Council?"

And before the Council had recovered from its first surprise, he was talking.

"Priests of the Rural Sanctuaries: You have said that your stories would seem unreal here. That is untrue. For the unreal *is not,* at Megatheopolis or anywhere else in the cosmos.

"The supernatural is unreal, and therefore *is not.*

"Have you forgotten the basic truth you learned in the First Circle? That there is only the cosmos and the electronic entities that constitute it, without soul or purpose, save so far as neuronic minds impose purpose upon it?

"No, your stories refer to real entities—if only to the imagery of your neuronic minds.

"There are many real entities which the Finger of Wrath cannot burn. I mention only solidographs, and remind you of the shadowiness of the wolves and other creatures you claim to fear. As for mental imagery, you cannot burn that except by turning the Finger of Wrath against your own skulls.

"One of you mentioned the Witchcraft. Has that one forgotten that the Witchcraft is *our* fosterling?

"I should not be telling you this. You should be telling it to your novices!

"Has the Hierarchy ever failed you? Yet now do you want the Hierarchy to drop all other business and, with much outward fuss and flourishing, attend only to you, because you are frightened—not hurt, merely frightened?

"How do you know that all this is not a test, imposed upon you by *us,* to determine your courage and resourcefulness? If it is a test, think how pitifully, thus far, you have failed!

"It may be a test.

"It may also be that some alien agency is striking at the Hierarchy, perhaps under cover of our fosterling the Witchcraft. And that we are holding our hand, to draw them out and learn all, before we strike in return. For the Hierarchy never strikes twice.

"If that is the case, elementary strategy forbids your being told anything, for fear of scaring off the enemy.

"This much I will tell you. The Hierarchy knew of the disturbances in your region long before you did. And it has concerned itself deeply with them.

"That is all you need to know. And you should have known it without asking!"

With cold gratification, Goniface noted that the last traces of panic had quite evaporated. The country priests stood straighter now, looked more like men. Still frightened—but only of their superiors. As they should be.

"Priests of the Rural Sanctuaries, you have grievously failed the Hierarchy. Our reports show that, since the beginning of the disturbances—or the test—in your region, you have done little but cry to the Hierarchy for help. It has been suggested that you be whipped. I am inclined to agree. Except that I believe you have enough iron in you not to fail again.

"The Hierarchy grips the globed Earth like a hand. Will it be your eternal disgrace to be remembered as the ones who *sought* to loosen, infinitesimally, one fingertip? I say *sought* advisedly, because we watch over you more closely than you think, and stand ever ready if even the least of you should fail.

"Not to fail, is your affair!

"Go back to your sanctuaries.

"Do what you should have done long ago.

"Call upon your courage and resourcefulness.

"Fear is a weapon—for you to use, not for others to use against you.

"You have been trained in its use.

"Use it!

"And as for Sathanas, also our fosterling, *our* Lord of Evil, *our* black counterpart to our Great God"—he stole an ironic sidewise glance at Sercival, to see how the old Fanatic was taking this—"use him, too. Whip him from your towns if that seems expedient. But never, never again, stoop so low—low even as Commoners!—as to believe in him!"

It was then—just as Goniface could see that the country priests had taken fire from his words and were beginning to burn with a desire to redeem themselves—that the laughter came. The walls of the Council Chamber were thick and proof against ordinary sound, yet still it came—evilly mirthful, uncanny peals.

It seemed to laugh at the Hierarchy—and at anyone who dared decree what *is* and what *is not*.

The country priests paled and edged closer together. The haughty faces of the archpriests more or less successfully masked shock, apprehension, and a furious thinking as to what that noise might be and what it might portend. Frejeris looked suddenly at Goniface. Old Sercival began to tremble with what seemed a queer sort of fear and a queerer satisfaction.

But it was in Goniface's ears that the laughter thundered most shakingly and dismayingly. Almost beyond shadow of doubt, it could have only one meaning. His experiment in the Great Square, which should even now be reaching its conclusion, must somehow have been thwarted, botched, spoiled—why else that mocking, gloating tone?

He had underestimated the enemy. The Witchcraft within a witchcraft had showed its hand at Megatheopolis much sooner than he had anticipated. They had even dared set up some kind of amplifier. True, Deth was not altogether unprepared for such a possibility—but he must not pin any false hopes on Deth.

Justifying his experiment to the Apex Council would have been a tough enough proposition, even if it had worked perfectly. And now, when it had been botched—

He must brazen it out somehow. Pretend he had anticipated everything. Pretend—

Thoughts flickered like wildfire across his mind.

But all the while he imperturbably fought to hold the eyes of the country priests, to maintain his ascendancy over them, to oppose the influence of that unnerving laughter. And he succeeded, although the eyes grew wide with doubt.

The laughter echoed off, shudderingly.

"Your audience is at an end," Goniface declared harshly. "Leave us!"

Too bad to send them off with his work half done. But there must be no witnesses to the coming crisis.

The country priests hurried off. It was only the swishing of their robes, but it sounded as if they were already whispering.

Old Sercival rose up like some ancient prophet, hand shakily extended toward Goniface. "That was the laughter of Sathanas! It is a judgment of the Great God upon you and the whole Hierarchy for centuries of hypocrisy and pretense! The Great God looses against the world his black dog Sathanas!"

And he sank back into his seat, trembling.

Not a bad act, Goniface commented to himself, whatever the old Fanatic expected to gain by it.

Providing it was altogether an act.

The Council shifted restlessly. Someone tittered contemptuously.

Goniface felt throbbing through him that strange, intoxicating pulsation—the same he had once felt years ago when the secret of his past had been within a hairbreadth of discovery. It was up to him now to snatch success from seeming failure.

A fat little priest pressed through the tail end of the country delegation as it left the Chamber, and fairly scampered toward Goniface.

Goniface stopped him. "Make your report to the assembled Apex Council, Brother Chulian!"

The fat little priest's cherubic mouth gaped like that of a fish. "The likeness of great hands cupped round Brother Jarles and carried him off! Sathanas spoke!"

The worst, thought Goniface. The victim, whose blasting would have helped passify the Council, escaped scot-free.

But to Chulian he said swiftly. "*Your* report! The rest we can hear from others better able to tell it."

The fat little priest dodged back as if water had been thrown in his face. He seemed for the first time to realize the presence of the Council. His piping voice grew subservient, his words terse.

"As instructed, I provoked the First Circle priest Brother Jarles to anger. I did this by ordering the Commoner Sharlson Naurya, whom Brother Jarles still regards emotionally, to serve in the Sanctuary. She, a well-known recalcitrant, with abnormal fear of the Sanctuaries, refused. I then accused her of Witchcraft, squeezing her shoulder to produce a witchmark. Brother Jarles struck me. We were both inviolable at the time. I was knocked down. Then I—"

"—your report ends, Brother Chulian," Goniface finished for him.

Across the ensuing silence Brother Frejeris' voice rang more musically than before. "If all we are to hear consists of such rash and mischievous madness as this—aimed directly against the stability of the Hierarchy—I will not need to ask for Brother Goniface's excommunication. Every archpriest will ask it for me."

"You will hear all," Goniface told him. "Hearing, you will understand."

But he could tell that his words fell flat. Even in the faces of his own Realists he could discern suspicion and distrust. Brother Jomald gave him a hard, meaningful look, as if to say, "The party disclaims all responsibility in this matter. You must handle it yourself—if you can." While in Brother Genchanin's face was open indignation. Procedures such as Chulian had described were distinctly not of the established sort. The scales were tipping away from him. Well, they could tip a while longer yet.

The fat little priest seemed to want to say more. His cherubic mouth twitched anxiously. Goniface nodded to him.

"May I make an addition to my report, your reverence?"

"If it concerns *your* part in the action."

"It does, your resplendency. And it puzzles me. When I tore Sharlson Naurya's smock to expose the witchmark, there were *three* such marks where I am sure my thumb alone had rested."

Goniface could have kissed the fat little priest. Here was a chance to raise his falling credit.

But his voice was faraway and musing as he replied. "And to think, Brother Chulian, that you might even now be a priest of the Third Circle, if you only had joined the virtue of deduction to the virtue of observation." He shook his head regretfully. "Well, I will give you a chance to redeem yourslf. After all, it was a most peculiar coincidence. Take another priest, now that you no longer have your partner Jarles, and arrest—the witch!"

The fat little priest goggled at him. "What witch, your dread resplendency?"

"Sharlson Naurya. And you had best be quick about it if you hope to catch her."

Realization dawned in Brother Chulian's baby-blue eyes. He goggled for a moment longer. Then he spun around like a teetotum and scurried for the door.

But this time it was he who stood aside for others. A meager spindly man in the black robe of a deacon strode with brassy self-assurance into the Council Chamber, followed by several priests bearing oddly shaped rolls and canisters.

He planted himself before the Council Table with his entourage of priests. He was a paragon of sallow ugliness, with dwarfishly bulging forehead and jutting ears like three-quarter saucers. Nevertheless, the inscrutable mask he preserved was a painstaking copy of that which confined the coldly handsome features of Goniface. He seemed to enjoy the animosity which greeted his appearance, as if he were well aware that, though his birth prevented him from ever entering the priesthood, he was nevertheless more feared than many an archpriest.

"And what has *your* servant Cousin Deth to tell us?" demanded one of the Moderates—not Frejeris.

Good, thought Goniface, they grow

angry. Bless Deth for the way he makes them lose their tempers.

The sallow man bowed low. "Your awful, august, exalted unimpeachabilities," he began with acid fawning. Cousin Deth knew how to make flattery an insult. "I need make no verbal report. These unprejudiced witnesses will report for me." He indicated the rolls and canisters. "A moving solidograph of all that transpired in the Great Square. A vocigraphic transcription of each word spoken by Brother Jarles, and, synchronized with both, a visigraphic record of the major neuro-emotional waves emitted by the crowd during his harangue. A graphic analysis, made at Cathedral Control Center, of the apparent physical nature of the shell which closed around Brother Jarles and carried him off. A transcription of the words and laughter that come at the end. With the usual supplements." And he bowed again, so that his black sleeves almost swept the floor.

"We care not for your pretty pictures!" cried the same Moderate who had spoken before, face red with anger. "We want your story of what finally happened, Deacon!"

Goniface noted that Frejeris was unsuccessfully signing the man to keep quiet and not waste their advantage in petty outbursts. Cousin Deth, quite unabashed, looked inquiringly at Goniface, who nodded to him.

"All went as planned, as the records show," Deth began, the ghost of a cynical smile playing around his slitlike mouth, as if the growing indignation pleased him. "At the end a mottled sphere, suggestive of hands, cupped around the priest. It sustained for an appreciable time the full power of the Great God's wrath. We were able to study it. Then it shot off, escaping us by a hairbreadth. For we had angels held in readiness to pursue, as you commanded." And he bowed toward Goniface, without mockery. "We know the quarter in which it vanished, and a search is now in progress, with good hope of ultimate success."

Instantly Goniface rose, motioning Deth to approach the table and prepare the records for viewing.

Now was the proper moment, felt Goniface. Deth's words had angered all of them, but the Moderates most, while the Realists had been impressed in spite of themselves. He addressed the Council.

"Archpriests of Earth, it had been said: 'As Megatheopolis goes, so goes the planet.' But to turn that aphorism to practical use, we must know in what direction Megatheopolis is going before it goes!

"No government that calls itself realistic can neglect to answer that question —realistically.

"What archpriest here, saving perhaps you, Brother Sercival, believed that an enemy would openly strike at Megatheopolis itself?

"*I* did not so believe. But I wanted to find out. That was one of the reasons for the experiment in the Great Square.

"Brothers, you have the answer. Sathanas came.

"No longer can we deny that our fosterling, the Witchcraft, conceals an enemy—an enemy daring and dangerous.

"No longer can we deny that, within the debased Witchcraft which we tolerate, there is another Witchcraft, which seeks to use the weapon of fear, not only against Commoners, but against priests. There is reason to believe that the members of this Inner Witchcraft may be identified by certain marks on their bodies. They show themselves cunning and resourceful.

"No longer can we dismiss as some trifling case of mass hysteria the Matter of the Frightened Priests. To give them courage, I told them it might be merely a test we had imposed upon them. But all of you know that three of our Fifth Circle scientists have admitted themselves baffled by those manifestations in the Rural Sanctuaries."

Goniface paused. The Moderates seemed angrier than ever. Plain talk of danger always angered them. But the Realists were listening. The look in

Brother Jomald's face had become one of grudging admiration, as if to say, "You're worming out of it. I didn't think you would this time."

His words were striking home.

"To return to the question: 'How goes Megatheopolis?'

"Brothers, the Inner Witchcraft is only one phase of the present unrest threatening the very existence of the Hierarchy. Everywhere are signs of dissatisfaction—faint, but building toward crisis.

"The years are long past when the Commoners were grateful to us for the orderliness the Hierarchy brought to a troubled Earth. Past, too, are the years when the Commoners were occupied with the problems of habituating themselves to a new way of life. The moment is fast approaching when the Hierarchy must prove that it is able to rule in its own right, without the advantage of special situations. If it survives that moment, it will endure as long as mankind. If it does not, it will be overthrown utterly—and much sooner than you think.

"Are we to meet that moment with half-measures, compromises, and hope?"

He directed the last statement at the Moderates. All of them save Frejeris were obviously spluttering with scarcely repressed anger at this open attack on their policies.

"To return to the main question: 'How goes Megatheopolis?'

"Brothers, there is only one way to find out. Only one way to discover the true temper of the Commoners. The closest observation of them in their normal round of life is insufficient. So are psychological tests. Because ever since they were invented in the Dawn Civilization, psychological tests have had the defect of being administered under artificial conditions. The one sure way, the only sure way, is to foment a sizable minor crisis and study it intensively."

The angriest Moderate started to get up. Frejeris forestalled him—with a certain reluctance, as if he realized that they could no longer defeat Goniface by a straightforward attack.

"One does not fight fire by throwing oil on it," he began.

"One does!" Goniface countered. "Oil is more penetrating than water. There is a kind of hidden, smoldering fire which only oil can reach and which lacks sufficient oxygen to ignite the oil. Such a fire, Brothers, smolders in the hearts of our Commoners. And the force operating against us from under cover of the Witchcraft is another such fire, hidden but dangerous.

"To discover the secret temper of our Commoners, to provide them with the instructive example of a priest blasted for blasphemy—or, in lieu of that, as actually happened, to lure the enemy into the open—I fomented a crisis.

"And now, archpriests of Megatheopolis, I give you a faithful recording of that crisis, for your contemplation and study, with a view to preventing the truly serious ones to come.

"After you have seen it, excommunicate me, if you still want to."

He felt very sure of himself.

Frejeris recognized the situation. "We will view the record," he said lightly, "reserving our judgment with regard to excommunication." He sat down.

While Goniface spoke, Cousin Deth's assistants had worked a change in the seemingly fleckless surface of the Council table. A circular depression about six feet across had appeared in the center. To one side were grouped smaller depressions, and certain slots had become apparent. The rolls and canisters had all disappeared—been inserted in the appropriate projections.

Deth had touched a control and, while Goniface was speaking, the pearly Council Chamber had slowly darkened, through an imperceptible series of grays. Now came utter blackness.

With the suddenness of creation a miniature scene sprang into being in the center of the table, just above the circular depression. Only an occasional mistiness, and a slight blurring when many figures were grouped together, testified that it was only a projection—a focusing of the patterns recorded on multiple tapes whirling noiselessly.

Pygmy figures in home-woven drab, scarlet-robed dolls of priests, cobblers, horses, carts, and wares, all complete—a sizeable portion of the Great Square, without the surrounding architecture.

Only now, instead of the Great God, the archpriests of the Apex Council brooded over it.

Up from the three smaller depressions rose stubby columns of light, yellow, green, blue, violet, fluctuating slightly but incessantly in height and saturation of color—indicative of the massed changes in the major neuro-emotional responses of the crowd.

There rose the hum and babble of pygmy voices, the clatter of tiny hoofs, the squeak of wooden wheels.

The scene in the Great Square was repeating itself.

Cousin Deth thrust his now-giant arm into the moving solidograph, momentarily intensifying, then shattering the illusion. His fingers negligently poked at and into two tiny-robed figures.

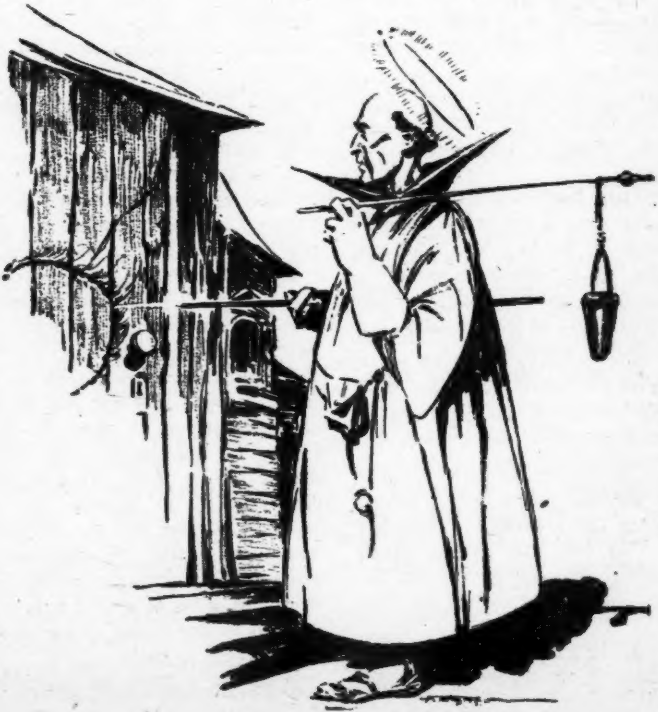
"Jarles and Chulian," he explained. "In a few moments we'll give you their voices in full intensity."

Goniface leaned back with satisfaction. He was studying the expressions on the faces of the peering archpriests—eerily lit masks seeming to hang against the distanceless blackness beyond the table. But now and then he looked at the solidograph.

It was at the moment of the first accusation of Witchcraft—the violet column concerned with fear, repulsion, and similar emotions had jumped abruptly and gone wan—that he chanced to note her face.

Almost, he jerked forward and grabbed at it.

But he caught himself in time, and



only leaned forward idly, as if it were his momentary fancy to take a closer look.

It couldn't be.

But there it was. That little coldly purposeful face, more perfect than any cameo, with its dark, fine-spun doll's hair. Not identically the same, of course, as the one printed in his memory. But if you allowed for the years and the maturing the years would have brought—

Geryl. Knowles Geryl.

But Chulian had referred to her by another name. What was it? Sharlson Naurya.

It was as if some long-locked door in Goniface's mind groaned and reverberated, straining against the hinges with a formless pressure from the other side.

He looked across the table toward the yellowish caricature that was Deth's face in the darkness, caught the beady black eyes. Deth melted backward, was gone.

Goniface stood up quietly and walked behind the chairs, as though he were tired of sitting. Then he moved away from the table.

He sensed Deth's presence beside him, caught the thin, bony wrist in his hand, and whispered very faintly into Deth's ear:

"The woman I sent Chulian to arrest. Sharlson Naurya. Find her. Take her from Chulian if he has her. But find her. Make her my secret prisoner."

And then, like an afterthought. "Unharmed, mind you, at least until I have seen and spoken with her."

In the darkness Cousin Deth smiled crookedly.

III.

For a moment Brother Chulian thought a shadow was scuttling toward him between the cobbles. He jerked away so that his halo reeled tipsily across the lightless street and his Inviolability field bumped that of his companion.

"I slipped," he gasped unconvincingly. "Some nasty Commoner must have thrown out greasy slops."

The other priest did not reply. Fervently Chulian hoped that he would not mind turning right at the next corner. It was a little longer that way, but you didn't have to pass the haunted house.

To his relief the fellow turned right without being asked.

Of course, the house wasn't really haunted, Chulian reminded himself quickly. That would be the sheerest nonsense. But it was such an ugly place, and the Commoners told such unpleasantly grotesque stories about it at confession.

Why did the Commoners have to have such narrow, twisty streets, and why was there such a strict curfew, Chulian complained to himself, as if it were somehow the Commoners' fault. Like a city of the dead. Not a person stirring, not a light showing, not a sound. Of course, all those rules were the laws of the Hierarchy, he remembered unwillingly. Still, there ought to be some provision for cases like this—say a law that the Commoners ought to listen for priests coming at night and be ready to set out lighted torches. A halo hardly gave you enough light to keep from tripping over things!

Like twin will-o'-the-wisps the two circular violet glows bobbed through the crazily curving trenches in darkness that were the streets of Megatheopolis.

Behind rose the greater glow of the Sanctuary. To Chulian it seemed like some warm hearth from which he had been unfairly pushed out into the cold. Why did they have to pick on him for jobs like this? He was just an innocent clerk, bothering no one. All he asked from life was peace and comfort, a decent supply of his favorite goodies, a chance to lie in bed—at this moment he could almost feel the cushiony softness—and watch his favorite solidographic books read themselves, and now and again a bit of special fun.

Who in the world could be so cruel as to object to that?

It all came from his miserable luck

at having been paired off with Jarles, he told himself pityingly. That sullen, nasty fellow! If he hadn't been paired with Jarles, he wouldn't have been forced into this wild plot, which he didn't understand and which seemed to have been designed solely to bring trouble and danger into a world that would go so smoothly if everyone were more like Brother Chulian!

Even then it would have been all right if he hadn't been so foolish as to mention those extra marks to Goniface. But if he hadn't told, they'd probably have found out, and he'd have been punished.

Witchmarks! Chulian shivered. Almost he could see them burning in the white flesh of that nasty girl. Why did some Commoner girls have to be brazen and sulky? Why couldn't they all be gentle and docile?

And now he was going to have to see her again and arrest her.

Witchmarks! He wished he could stop thinking about them. As part of his priestly education he had read a book about the Middle Ages of Dawn Civilization and its primitive Witchcraft. A witchmark was supposed to be where a witch suckled her familiar. A familiar was supposed to be a little helper given her by Satan—Sathanas.

Of course, it had all been nonsense then, and was nonsense now.

But why had Goniface called the girl a witch when he had heard of the extra marks, and sent Chulian to arrest her?

Chulian didn't really want to know the answer. He didn't want to be a Third Circle priest. He just wanted to be left in peace. If he could only make them understand that!

His companion nudged him into attentiveness, pointing at a rectangle of deeper blackness in the irregular rubble-and-plaster wall. They had arrived.

Chulian rapped loudly against the rough wooden door. When your fingers wore the Gloves of Inviolability you could hardly hurt them.

"Open in the name of the Great God and his Hierarchy!" he commanded, his reedy voice amplified by the silence.

"The door is not barred. Open it yourself," came the quiet, muffled, gently mocking answer.

Chulian bristled. Such insolence! But then they had come to arrest the girl, not to teach her manners. He jerked the latchstring and pushed.

The room was dimly and unevenly lit by the flickering of a thrifty fire. Faint coils of smoke, escaping from the fireplace, writhed about lazily, some of them eventually finding their way out through the tiny square air hole in the low ceiling. Chulian's companion coughed.

Before the fireplace a shuttle was moving busily through the threads of a large loom, weaving some darkishly figured fabric.

Its uninterrupted, jumpy rhythm made Chulian uneasy. He hesitated and shot a quick glance at his companion. Side by side, close together, they moved forward until they could see the other side of the loom and Sharlson Naurya.

She was wearing a close-fitting dress of gray homespun. Her wrapt eyes seemed to be looking not so much at her work as through it, though her busy fingers never hesitated. Was it only threads she was weaving, Chulian wondered, or something else—something bigger?

With almost a guilty start, he realized of whom she reminded him. Only a suggestion, of course— Still, there was in her face the same dark strength, the same sense of hidden yet limitless purpose, as he had just seen, and cringed before, in the archpriest Goniface.

After a moment she turned her head and looked at them. But there was no change in her expression—as if they were merely part of that bigger, invisible fabric she had been weaving. Without haste she tucked the shuttle into the warp and stood up facing them, folding her hands at her waist.

"Sharlson Naurya," Chulian intoned solemnly but a trifle jerkily, "we come, inviolable emissaries of the Hierarchy, to do the bidding of the Great God."

Her green eyes smiled at that, if eyes can smile. But what Chulian wondered was what those eyes saw when they looked past him. Brazen girl! What right had she to take this so calmly!

He drew himself up.

"Sharlson Naurya, in the name of the Great God and his Hierarchy, I arrest you!"

She bent her head. And now there was something twisted and evil about the way her eyes smiled. She suddenly spread her hands outward from her waist.

"Run, Puss!" she cried with an almost mischievous urgency. "Tell the Black Man!"

A glittering talon ripped at the waist the gray homespun of her dress—from within. There was a rapid disturbance of the cloth. Then through the slit something wriggled and sprang.

Something furry, big as a cat, but more like a monkey, and incredibly lean.

Like a swift-scuttling spider it was up the wall and across the ceiling, clinging effortlessly.

Chulian's muscles froze. With a throaty gasp his companion lunged out an arm. From the pointing finger crackled a needle of violet light, scorching a shaky, zigzag track in the crude plaster of wall and ceiling.

The thing paused for a moment in the air hole, looking back. Then it was gone, and the violet beam spat futilely through the air hole toward the black heavens, where one star glittered.

But Chulian continued to stare upward, his slack jaw trembling. He had gotten one look at the tiny face. Not when the thing moved, for then it had been only a rippling blur, but when it paused to glance back.

Not all the features of a face had been there. Some were missing and others seemed somehow telescoped into each other. And the fine fur encroached on them.

Nevertheless, where the features showed through the fur, they were white, and, in spite of all distortions, they were a peering, chinless, hellish, but terribly convincing caricature of the features of Sharlson Naurya.

And the fur had been of exactly the same shade as her dark hair.

Finally Chulian looked back at her. She had not moved. Still stood there smiling with her eyes.

"What was that thing?" he cried. It was much more a frightened appeal than a demand.

"Don't you know?" she asked gravely.

A priest was supposed to know everything.

She reached for a shawl hanging from the end of the loom. "I am ready," she said. "Aren't you going to take me to the Sanctuary?"

Chulian started at the word. The Sanctuary! Of course! Things like this couldn't happen in the Sanctuary.

Not things like familiars.

Things like familiars were unreal—did not exist.

But in that case he had just watched the unreal scuttle across the ceiling.

And something from the world of *is not* had slashed the strong homespun of Sharlson Naurya's dress.

"Come, daughter!" he commanded, blustering instinctively. "You are under arrest. We must swiftly convey you to the Sanctuary!"

"I will go with you," Sharlson Naurya answered quietly, "as far as you dare."

And pulling her shawl around her, she walked toward the door.

It seemed darker than ever outside, and dead still. If any Commoners had heard the disturbance, they had not come out to investigate. Of course, that was the law, but Chulian wished it weren't, or that some Commoner would break it—just this once. Or if only they would meet up with a patrol of deacons!

Through the narrow, uneven streets hurriedly bobbed the two violet halos, straining toward the beacon-glow of the Sanctuary.

If only the girl wouldn't walk so slowly! Of course, they could hurry her up—each had an elbow in one of his puffed hands—but somehow Chulian didn't like the idea of hurting her, especially since she was otherwise so docile. After all, that thing of hers was somewhere up on the roofs, perhaps following them. At any moment he might look up and see a tiny anthropoid muzzle poked over an edge, outlined against the stars.

When they got to the Sanctuary, things would be different!

Lightless doorways, lightless mouths of other streets, marched past them. At the next corner they must turn to the left to avoid the haunted house, Chulian reminded himself. This was no time to be passing such a place.

But when they got to the turn, the street to the left was walled—stuffed solid—with blackness.

Not the star-hazed blackness through which they had been passing, but blackness utter and complete, making the rest seem gray.

Nothing more.

Chulian looked sideways past the girl at Brother Arolj's face, sickly under the glowing halo, and caught an answering panicky glance.

In a rush, so they wouldn't be able to flinch, they plunged into the blackness, the girl between them.

Their halos were extinguished. There was no light whatever.

As if out of a wall of ink, they scrambled back again, gasping. For one horrid moment Chulian feared they would be trapped in the blackness forever.

They turned to the right. Blackness filled that street mouth to brimming, too.

Chulian did not dare look directly behind him, mainly from fear, but partly because he still retained some shreds of priestly pride in the presence of the girl.

For Sharlson Nauyra still stood obediently between them. She could have escaped merely by staying in the blackness—they had both let go of her. Of course, she might be afraid of the blackness, too. But Chulian did not think so.

From the corner of his eye he darted a backward glance. It was as he feared. The blackness had followed them down the street by which they had come.

The only way open was directly ahead, past the haunted house. Something wanted them to pass the haunted house. But it was that or nothing—before the blackness should decide to encroach still further and swallow them up.

That last fear must have occurred simultaneously to Brother Arolj, for they started forward at a panicky trot, fairly dragging their prisoner between them.

Behind them steadily flowed the wall of blackness, lapping round their heels when they faltered. By the time they reached the little neglected square and the haunted house, they were running.

Much taller than the other houses it stood, a landmark of desolation. But Chulian only caught a glimpse of its entirety of crazily sagging, strangely *slack* walls and drooping circular windows, like pouched and leering eyes. For the blackness suddenly closed in from several directions, like a huge sack, cutting off the way ahead, blacking out the stars, driving them across the rubbly ground toward the mouth of the sack—and the wrinkled, sphincterlike doorway of the house itself.

There Chulian had his one burst of desperate, fear-inspired courage. He pointed his finger at Naurya.

"In the name of the Great God, if you don't make it go away, I'll blast you!" he threatened through trembling lips.

Instantly the blackness swooped inward, closing about them like an envelope, bare inches away, half blotting out their view of each other.

"I won't! I won't!" Chulian cried out, dropping his hand.

The blackness retreated somewhat.

And now Sharlson Naurya finally smiled at him with her lips. She reached out, and before he realized what she was going to do, slapped his chest smartly at a certain spot.

His Inviolability field went limp. His halo winked out. His deflated scarlet robe hung loosely.

She patted his cheek, as one pats the cheek of a child. His flesh crawled at the gentle touch.

"Good-by, Little Brother Chulian," she said, and slipped through the sagging doorway into the haunted house.

The blackness shot back, was not.

And up from the street Cousin Deth came running.

"Your prisoner! Where is she?" he demanded curtly of Chulian.

"Didn't you see it? That awful blackness?" Chulian countered unsteadily.

Cousin Deth drew back from him. "I wasn't aware you priests were afraid of the dark."

Like cold water or a slap in the face, the insult quenched Chulian's fears. It stung. For a moment he was conscious only that he had been insulted by a mere deacon.

"So your prisoner—a girl—managed to escape from you?" Deth was staring speculatively past Chulian at the sagging doorway.

"She went in there!" Chulian retorted angrily. "And if you're so eager to get her, why don't you go in after her yourself?"

In reply, Cousin Deth only stared at him venomously, but under that stare Brother Chulian wilted.

Cousin Deth turned toward the street.

"Rouse Commoners!" he shouted to someone. "Set a cordon round the house!"

When he turned back to Chulian, his stare was still as stonily venomous.

"I shall probably be asked to enter this place tomorrow to cleanse it of evil," he said. "Since you are so desirous of seeing me enter it, your reverence, I will ask that you be made my assistant, to accompany me."

IV.

The guiding hands left Jarles, after a slight, momentary tightening of their grip, which seemed to mean, "Stay there!" He felt the edge of a box or bench against the calves of his legs, but he did not sit down.

Gradually the faintest suggestion of his surroundings was revealed to Jarles, like a midnight picture deftly painted by a master artist in brief phosphorescent strokes against a black surface tinged with violet.

He was in an extensive, very low-ceilinged room. Air currents and the way his footsteps sounded told him that.

At what seemed the far end of the room, on a low dais, was a kind of chair or throne, faintly glowing, with a squat table in front of it, and on the table something that might have been a clumsy old-fashioned book, open. Little creatures of some sort seemed to be playing around the throne, for he could discern a scampering movement close to the floor and hear an indistinct scratching and scuffing—and once or twice a faint *plop,* as if something suctorial had been pulled away from a flat surface.

Then one of the creatures sprang up on the throne, squatting there impishly—a tiny, very lean, vaguely monkeylike silhouette.

What came next sent a dry shiver up his back and started his scalp pricking. For the creature spoke. Or at least whispers came from the direction of the throne in voices too weak and shrill and oddly mumbling to be human—and yet human nevertheless. He could only make out a little here and there.

". . . been tonight, Mysie?"

". . . inside his robe . . . a Fourth Circle priest . . . scared . . . wits."

"Jill?"

". . . on a vist far away, to tell. . . ."

"Meg?"

". . . on his chest, as he slept. . . ."

"And Puss? But I know. . . ."

"Yes, Dickon."

The one perched on the throne seemed to be asking, the others to be answering, the questions, as if in parody of human beings making reports to a leader or chairman. The last voice had a disturbing familiarity which set him quivering.

"I ask once more! Who are you?"

he called loudly—and with more confidence than he felt. "What do you want of me? Why this mystery?"

The echoes died hollowly. There was no reply—only a sudden scurrying. In a moment the dais was empty.

Jarles sat down. If they chose to play this sort of game with him, there was nothing he could do about it—save refuse to be impressed, or at least refuse to show it.

But what could be the purpose of their game? In an effort to find some clue to his rescuers—and captors—he rehearsed in his mind what had happened since he had stood awaiting death in the Great Square.

The first section of his memories was clouded by shock. The impression of something solid, semitransparent, and blackly streaked closing around him. Blinding blue light and a crackling, howling, laughing pandemonium of sound. A nauseating swoop upward and then down again into a black hole that suddenly yawned.

After that, a brief period of waiting in absolute darkness. Then hands. Hands which eluded him when he sought to catch hold of them. Hands which guided him for an indeterminate distance and then left him in what cautious exploration showed to be a small cell. A long period of waiting. Again hands, bringing him here.

Precious little but darkness and silence.

But at least, after the first shock had worn off, the darkness and silence provided him with an opportunity to think. What Jarles had said in the Great Square had been largely unpremeditated—the vocal explosion of anger. Now he realized that he believed it. Definite convictions had replaced murky dissatisfactions.

The Hierarchy was wrong. It had duped, exploited, and brutalized mankind. Warped the destiny of the whole species. Once you realized that, the only thing you could do was throw in your lot with the Commoners. Seek to enlighten and arouse them, whatever the cost.

Hypocrisy had poisoned the Hierarchy.

Hypocrisy was the basic evil.

He was very sure of that.

But now that he knew where he stood personally, this waiting in the dark became doubly frustrating.

For a long time he peered toward the ghostly dais and throne, until he began to think he could make out other silhouettes, much fainter even than those of the small scampering creatures, so faint that they vanished when he looked at them directly. Larger silhouettes, as of human figures seated midway between him and the violet-tinted blackness of the far wall, though none directly between him and the throne.

All of a sudden his eye was caught by a fleeting smudge of phosphorescence on one of the silhouettes—where the teeth should be. Then brief yellowish tracks in the air, as if made by the waving of fingertips dipped in phosphorescence.

He looked at his own hand. Each fingernail glowed yellowly.

The room must be bathed in ultraviolet light.

Perhaps the others were wearing some sort of transformer goggles.

"The Black Man is delayed, Sisters."

He started violently. Not because the voice—a woman's—was the first undeniably human one he had heard. Not because the words were mysterious and darkly suggestive. But because it was so devilishly akin to one of the shrill, subhuman voices he had heard mumbling earlier. As if this were the voice which the weaker one had been mimicking.

"Dickon is here. The Black Man cannot be far away."

Another woman's voice. Another impression of shuddering similarity.

And Dickon. That ancient-sounding name had been addressed to the creature squatting on the throne.

The first woman, in eager malicious tones: "What work did you do tonight, Sister?"

The second woman: "I sent Mysie to trouble a Fourth Circle priest—may Sathanas torment him eternally! She crept in his robe and scared him into white fits—if I can believe her. She's such a sweet little liar when her mind is away from mine. Whatever happened, Mysie was famished when she came back. She'd drain me dry if I let her. The little glutton!"

But Jarles had heard the fragments of that story earlier—told by a scurrying something called Mysie.

Abruptly his mind grasped the thread linking together all this shivery confusion.

The Witchcraft of the Dawn Civilization.

This would be a meeting of witches to report their exploits—a coven meeting. The Black Man—that would be the chief of this group or coven. And those little servant-creatures supposedly suckled on witch's blood, drawn through the witch-mark. What were they called? Familiars!

But he had told the Commoners, and he believed it, that there was no Witchcraft, save the debased and harmless remnant which the Hierarchy preserved for its own purposes.

This seemed debased enough, in a sense, with those bestial little manikins —phantasms of retrograde evolution. But harmless? He did not get that impression.

Witchcraft! Something that catered to the basest superstitions. That fed on the Hierarchy's leavings. Hypocrisy battening on hypocrisy.

But these people had rescued him. They seemed in some way opposed to the Hierarchy.

He must know more.

He turned again toward the dais, intending to address further demands to the darkness and seek to force an answer.

But the throne was no longer empty. A dead-black, manlike shape was sitting in it. No diminutive Dickon this time.

The Black Man.

And then a voice from the shape—a silky, steely voice, bubbling with malefic mirth.

"Your pardon for my delay, Sisters. But tonight I was as busy as a priest. First must I guide the Hands of Sathanas to snatch a renegade priestling from under the very nose of the Great God. He almost sneezed in surprise, Sisters! Next Puss came scampering to tell me that the Hierarchy had seized our Sister Persephone and was conveying her to the Sanctuary. So Dickon and I must float over the roofs and drop down the Black Veil to fuddle her captors and persuade them to escort her to a safe place of refuge."

The voice was at once attractive and repellent to Jarles. He felt that he would like the man—and hate him!

"It tickles me, Sisters, now and then to use the priests' science against them. And no doubt our master is grateful to be relieved of a bit of extra work. Do you know the Black Veil, Sisters? One of the little tricks we have developed from the Hierarchy's solidograph. Two lights can make a darkness, Sisters, if they're of the same frequency—interference, it's called. The projector of the Black Veil sends out multiple frequencies which automatically adjust to neutralize all light in the focal region. That's the only real darkness for you, Sisters—one that is born of two conflicting lights!

"But I monopolize the conversation, while all of you have doubtless as amusing tales to tell. First, though, our reverences to our masters!"

The Black Man rose, stretching his arms outward and upward in invocation —a batlike shadow against cloudy phosphorescence.

"To Black Sathanas, Lord of Evil, our eternal allegiance!"

"To Sathanas, our allegiance," echoed the shadowy ring of witches—a dozen voices at least.

And with those voices, like a parody of a boys' choir, the shrill falsetto parroting of the familiars.

"To Asmodeus, King of the Demons,

on Earth our master, our lifelong obedience!"

"To Asmodeus, our obedience." Again that half-chanted response with its piping overtones.

"To the covens and the Witchcraft, to our sister witches and brother warlocks, both here on Earth and secretly dwelling in heaven, to the little ones, and to the Commoners sweating under the Hierarchy's yoke, our loyalty and love!"

"To the covens, our love."

"For the Great God, self-styled ruler of the universe, fat and impotent phantom, our laughter and hate!"

"For the Great God, our hate."

"For the Hierarchy, his underlings, puffed red parasites, our devices and doom!"

"For the Hierarchy, our doom!"

Then the Black Man's voice went low and ominous—a far-carrying, shivery half-whisper.

"Gather, darkness, and enshroud the Earth! Come, fear, and shake the world!"

"Gather, darkness!"

On his narrow seat Jarles twisted uncomfortably, clenching his fists in exasperation. The same old mummery! The same old feeding on ignorance and fear! Just like the Hierarchy, though claiming to oppose it. Once more he felt welling up in him that murky anger, the irresistible urge to strike out at all frauds and hypocrisies—to rip aside all masks. The Black Man was again reclining in the throne. And now his suave, sardonic voice was more leisurely.

"Before we proceed to our regular business, there is the matter of new members. Persephone?"

From just beside him in the darkness, Jarles heard Sharlson Naurya answer.

He was triply confounded—by her unsuspected close presence, by a realization of what had made the voice of the creature called Puss disturbingly familiar, and by what she said.

"I propose for membership the former First Circle priest, Armon Jarles! He has proved himself by publicly blaspheming the Great God and daring the Great God's wrath. He should make a cunning and potent warlock."

"Bring him forward," commanded the Black Man, "first taking from him that which must be taken!"

A pair of hands gripped each of Jarles' arms. He felt something needle-sharp prick his back deeply. He gasped and floundered forward, struggling.

"Be not alarmed," called the Black Man, mockingly. "We have what we want—the seed for that which must be grown. Bring him to the altar, Sisters, that he may bow his head to the Book and be baptized by me with his new name—his witch-name—Dis!"

At that Jarles found his voice.

"Why should I join with you?"

A startled silence. Then, close to his ear, Sharlson Naurya's whisper, "Be quiet! You'll spoil everything!" And a sharp pressure from the fingers on that side.

The warning only stung him on. "What makes you so sure I'll enter your Witchcraft?"

Again the whisper, "Where else do you think you can find refuge, you fool!"

There was a flurry of murmurings—human and subhuman.

But the Black Man had risen. "Softly, Persephone, softly," he called. "Remember, no one may become witch or warlock save of his own uninfluenced free will. It seems that your recruit has certain reluctances. Let him tell us about them."

"First tell me what you would expect of me," Jarles replied.

The Black Man's voice was faintly edged with derision. "I thought you had guessed. To abjure the Great God. To give yourself, body and soul, into the service of Sathanas. To sign your name in his Book by touching your forehead to it, so that it will receive the individual and unique pattern of your thought waves, which cannot be counterfeited. To submit to certain other formalities."

"Not enough!" retorted Jarles. "I might be entering the Hierarchy, in view of all this supernatural mummery! What are the aims of this organization, whose slave you ask me to become?"

"Not *ask*, Armon Jarles," said the Black Man. "And not a slave—only a free man who has contracted certain obligations. As for our aims—you heard our ritual. Overthrow of the Great God and his Hierarchy!"

Jarles' bitter reply started another flurry of murmurs.

"In order that you may raise up your own degraded superstitions to be the Decalogue of a new Hierarchy, and tyrannize over the world in your turn? The scientists of the Golden Age had good aims, too, but they forgot them as soon as they tasted power. For that matter, how do you know that you are not the dupes of the Hierarchy, yourselves? True, you rescued me. If I could be sure of you, I could be grateful for it. But the methods of the Hierarchy are devious. They let me speak to the Commoners when they could easily have silenced me. Perhaps they also let me be rescued, for some indecipherable purpose."

"I do not quite know how to satisfy you, Armon Jarles—if you can be satisfied," replied the Black Man with amused perplexity. "Regarding the ultimate intentions of the Witchcraft, when and if the Hierarchy is overthrown—that involves matters of high policy which I may not discuss. There are some things which a man must take on faith, and common sense. We assumed that your outburst in the Great Square indicated that you would be eager to join with us, who are eternal enemies of the Hierarchy. Apparently we assumed too much. To be honest with you, I think that close contact with the Hierarchy has temporarily warped your judgment—it often does!—making you suspicious of everything and a little too inclined to attribute supersubtle and inscrutable purposes to the Hierarchy. Although you hate it, you are still in awe of it. You see what I mean?

"But, Armon Jarles, if there is anything within reason which I can do to satisfy you of our purposes, name it!"

"There is!" Jarles declared hotly, disregarding the imperative pressure of Naurya's fingers. "If you are sincere in your opposition to the Hierarchy and your love of the Commoners, drop all this mummery and deception! Don't add to the Commoners' superstitions. Can't you see that their ignorance is at the root of everything? Tell them the truth! Rouse them against the Hierarchy!"

"And suffer the consequences?" the Black Man mocked. "Have you forgotten what almost happened to you in the Great Square—and how the Commoners took your words?"

"I ask a favor," interjected Sharlson Naurya hurriedly. "This man is a thick-headed idealist. He is suspicious and fault-finding by nature. Make him a warlock by force! He'll come around to our way of seeing as soon as he's had time to think things over."

"No, Persephone. I am afraid we cannot make an exception—even for a thick-headed idealist."

"Lock him up safely, then, until he sees the light!"

"Nor, Persephone, may we use force—whether compulsion or restraint. Though I confess there are times when even I itch to!" And he laughed.

His voice immediately became serious then—in so far as such a bubblingly mirthful voice ever could.

"I'm afraid it's now or never, Armon Jarles. I will say a little more—though it's not to my liking to try to persuade anyone. First, what would happen to the Commoners if they rebelled against the Hierarchy? Second, you accuse us of fostering superstition. But what weapon is there except fear for a small group seeking to overthrow an empire more gigantic and powerful than even you realize? Third, you are obviously revolted by what you call our mummery. Regarding that, let me ask you to suppose for a moment that there is no Sathanas, that our malign supernatural powers are only clever trickery. Just suppose, mind you! I don't say it's the case. But if it were, wouldn't we have to *pretend* to believe in it all, even to ourselves, in order to do the job right? Like an author must believe in the story he is committing to a reading tape?"

"But all the time you're implying the opposite, aren't you?" Jarles cut in, with the eager, almost vindictive tone of one who thinks he has spotted the basic flaw. "That it's all real—the supernatural, Sathanas, and the rest of it?"

"It's your business to decide what I imply! And now—no more talk. What shall it be, Armon Jarles? This is your last chance."

Jarles hesitated, looking around at the circle of black, phosphorus-touched forms that were now very close. They would probably kill him if he refused. He knew too much.

And then there was Naurya, whom he had thought lost to him forever. If he went through with this, he would be near her. And she seemed to want him. Weren't Dis and Persephone King and Queen of Hell?

And then all these people—the Black Man and the rest of them. His feelings toward them were mixed. He might dislike what they did, but he couldn't hate them personally. They had saved his life.

He was terribly tired, he realized suddenly. He couldn't be expected to dare death, of his own free will, twice in one day.

Perhaps they were right. Perhaps there *was* a supernatural. It was hard to understand how anyone but a devil could have created those scuttling little familiars. Perhaps he was wrong.

And Naurya's fingers were conveying an insistent, anxious message. "Say yes! Say yes!"

When he opened his lips, it was to say "Yes."

But—just as had happened in the Great Square—his idealist's white-hot anger at all shams and supernatural mummery, like some possessing demon, seized control of him.

"No! What I said I meant! I will not compromise with hypocrisy! I will have no part in your Black Hierarchy!"

"Very well, Armon Jarles! You have made your choice!" rang the Black Man's answer.

The hands let go his arms. The Black Man seemed to spring at him. He flailed out wildly. The picture that had been painted indistinctly in blackness and phosphorescence now whirled with movement, became a formless chaos.

He was seized by other hands—smooth, rubbery-hided, and very strong. He sensed in them the pressure of some kind of field, though different in texture from the Inviolability fields of the scarlet robes. He struggled futilely.

Something small and furry, but with claws, grabbed his bare leg. He kicked out convulsively. He heard the Black Man order, "Back, Dickon! Back!" His leg was free.

He had time to cry out, "It's all shams and lies, Naurya! All shams and lies!" And to hear from the darkness her angry laughter and her scathing cry, "Idiot! *Idealist!*"

Then he was being rushed along by a power he could not resist. Out of the room, down some narrow corridor that turned and turned again, and then reversed, like a maze. Staggering, stumbling, his shoulders buffeted by unseen walls. Then upstairs. A blindfold quickly whipped over his eyes. Another corridor. More stairs. His thoughts whirling as dizzily as he.

Finally, cold night air in his nostrils and against his sweaty skin. The feel of cobbles under his feet.

And, in his ear, the mocking voice of the Black Man.

"I know idealists never change their minds, Brother Jarles. But if you should prove the exception to the rule, come back to the spot at which I shall release you, and wait. We might contact you. We might give you a second chance."

A few more steps and they halted.

"And now, Brother Jarles," said the Black Man, "go practice what you preach!"

A shrewd push sent Jarles spinning, so that he stumbled and fell painfully on the cobbles. He jerked himself up, whipping off the blindfold.

But the Black Man was nowhere in sight.

He was in the mouth of one of the streets that opened on the Great Square.

In the sky was the first faint suggestion of dawn, magnifying the empy immensity of the Great Square, touching with lovely shades of opalescence the towering domes and spires of the Sanctuary, paling a little the blue nimbus of the Great God.

And from the hillside farmlands, gathering power in its sweep across the Great Square, came a chill wind that cut to the bone.

One man, naked and friendless, doomed by the Hierarchy, cast out by the Witchcraft, alone against the world.

V.

The faint, silver clashing of unseen cymbals and a mighty choir of invisible angelic voices, stirring yet heavenly sweet, heralded the approach of the Exorcisers to the small square in which stood the haunted house. The Commoners blocking their way drew back to let them pass. But since the streets inclosing the Square were wedged tight with Commoners, and since other Commoners crowded in to get a closer view of the procession, and since none of the Commoners were willing to encroach on the unkempt and accursed grounds surrounding the haunted house, and frantically resisted being shoved in that direction, there were several of them gently cuffed aside by inviolable, red-gloved priestly hands, and one or two children knocked down, before the Exorcisers issued into the Square.

An excited murmur greeted them. Megatheopolis was astir with rumor of mighty doings in the supernatural world, and the close presence of dread Sathanas, who had once again risen from Hell to challenge the omnipotence of his Master. Had he not snatched up a priest from the very steps of the Cathedral? Chortling so that all Megatheopolis shook with fear? True, they said the priest was a bad one, deserving to be jerked down into the Realm of Eternal Punishment. But it seemed there had been some dispute between the Great God and Sathanas as to who should begin the punishing. And it also seemed that Sathanas was more eager to recruit devils for his legion than to attend to his proper business of tormenting the damned souls turned over to him by the Great God.

Then early this morning had come word that the Hierarchy would cleanse the haunted house of evil. This seemed an exceedingly wise and logical procedure, since the haunted house was a relic of the Golden Age and therefore a likely lair of Sathanas and his friends, who dearly loved those ancient, overweening, star-storming sinners. And there was also a lesser rumor—none knew who had started it—that a young witch had escaped from priestly captors and sought refuge in the place.

So, from earliest dawn, the cordon of chilled and apprehensive Commoners Cousin Deth had set around the Square was augmented by curious and expectant newcomers, agog with wild stories, until by middle morning the streets were packed. Of course, taking a half holiday would mean staying up late for the next few nights to catch up on tithe work. Still, the priests did not object—seemed rather to approve of their presence—and there was a tremendous though terrifying fascination in the possibility of witnessing an actual clash between the Hierarchy and the Lord of Evil.

No matter how hard and wearisome an age this might be, it was certainly a very exciting one with regard to manifestations of the supernatural. That couldn't be denied.

The music and pomp of the Procession of Exorcisers was well designed to whip up the mob's anticipations to a high pitch.

First came four young priests, handsome and tall as angels, each bearing before him, like a truncheon, a gleaming rod of wrath.

Then two deacons bearing censers from which a sweet incense dispersed throughout the Square.

Next a priest who walked alone, apparently the one in charge. Rather short and dumpy he seemed, but well puffed out and carrying his head high. The Fifth Ward goggled to see their ghostly counselor, Brother Chulian, in such a position of authority.

After him, almost a score of priests, some with the lightning-and-coil insignia of the Fourth Circle emblazoned on their chests, bearing all manner of weird and awe-inspiring implements—globes that glowed even in the bright sunlight, tubes, canisters, and oddly shaped metal boxes—all of them ornately decorated and bejeweled, and decked with religious emblems.

Last of this group, four grim-faced priests, easing along something that resembled a metallic snailshell, so gigantic that there was hardly room for it in the narrow street. It floated unwieldily at shoulder height. They guided it to the top of a tiny knoll on the desolate grounds and stepped away. Then, while the crowd gaped, one of them made certain mystic passes in the air, whereupon it slowly sank, crushing the weeds and bushes beneath, until it came to rest with its flaring muzzle pointing toward the haunted house.

But the rear guard of the procession rather distracted from this exhibition. The excited babbling of the crowd dropped momentarily into a whispering key, as those in front told those behind the identity of the little man in black. Cousin Deth had quite a reputation.

And at sight of the object borne behind him, several children set up a dismal wail. It looked like a large, deep bowl, tightly covered. From it trailed downward a white mist, and it was dripping slowly, leaving a trail of little white pellets, which melted to nothingness but were bad to step on with bare feet, because they stuck and burned. The Commoners in the front ranks felt an icy wave pass.

Such containers of holy water normally flanked the doorway of the Cathedral, chilling the entry. More than one child had had skin torn from his fingers, when he had inquisitively touched one of them and then been jerked away by a screeching mother. No wonder the priests carrying it exerted their Inviolability to the fullest!

The invisible music rose to an exalting climax, then broke off. The murmuring of the crowd was hushed. For a moment there was silence in the Square. Then one of the young priests strode with great dignity toward the house, bearing his rod of wrath above his head like a gleaming sword. Heads turned as, breathlessly, every Commoner watched his approach.

"This place is evil!" he cried suddenly in a great voice. "It is offensive to the nostrils of the Great God. Tremble, Sathanas! Cower, ye fiends! For, lo, I inscribe above the door the brand of the Hierarchy!"

He stopped directly in front of the oddly wrinkled doorway or entry-sphincter. A violet brilliance gushed from the extended rod, of the same hue as his halo, which was almost invisible in the sunlight. Slowly he traced a burning circle.

What happened next was not part of the program. He leaned forward suddenly to peer through the irregular orifice in the doorway, leaving the fiery circle unclosed. He must have seen something of exceptional interest, for he thrust in his head. Instantly the doorway puckered and snapped tight around his neck, leaving him frantically kicking and plunging, while his rod, still gushing violet light, set the green weeds smoking.

There were gasps and scattered screams and a few shrieks of hysterical laughter from the crowd. The three other young priests dashed forward to help their companion, one of them snatching up the fallen rod, which instantly ceased to flame. They tugged and pushed at him violently, and pried at the doorway. The wall gave a little, as if semielastic. That was all.

Then the door opened wide of its own accord and they all sprawled backward in the smoking weeds. The young priest who had been trapped sprang up and darted into the house before the others could stop him, even if they had tried to. The door clenched shut behind him.

The house began to shake.

Its slack walls tightened, bulged, were crossed by ripples and waves of movement. Its windows all squeezed shut. One wall stretched perceptibly, another contracted. There were other distortions.

An upper window dilated and through it the young priest was ejected, as if the house had tasted him and then spat him out. Halfway down he exerted his Inviolability, so that his fall was slowed and cushioned. He bounced gently.

This time the laughter of the crowd did not sound entirely hysterical.

The house became quiescent.

There was a flurry of activity among the priests tending the instruments. Hurried consultations. Two of them darted over toward Cousin Deth, who was standing to one side, doing nothing. Those tending the great coiled tube atop the knoll readied themselves and looked about inquiringly, as if wondering why they were not ordered into action.

But of all the Exorcisers, none felt so futile and confused as Brother Chulian. His under lip pouted forward, as if he were going to cry. Why must things like this happen to him? Thrust into a position of seeming importance by Deth's malicious whim, he knew less of what was going on than any of the others. If only he hadn't forgotten himself last night and insulted the cruel little deacon!

The four young priests, retreating at last from the haunted house, stopped near him. Made careless of dignity by excitement, they argued together. The one who had been tossed from the upper window was being questioned by the others.

"Who wouldn't have looked inside?" he asserted, heatedly. "Two bare feet scampering, that's what I saw, I tell you! Just those two little bare feet, with nothing on top of them. When they danced off, I just had to see where they were going! Then, when I was caught, a lot of ratty little Commoners came in from somewhere and began making the most insulting remarks about my head. As if it were something stuffed and hanging on the wall! You'd have lost your temper, too! I wanted to chastise them. That's why I ran inside."

"But what made you jump out the window?"

"The house, I tell you! I didn't see the Commoners anywhere. But it all began to heave and shake. The floor lifted under my feet and knocked me against a wall. The wall bounced me to another. Then the floor got me again. Before I knew it I was upstairs, and I got a last bang, and a window opened in the wall just before I hit it. I couldn't help myself!"

Chulian did not want to listen. It was all too disturbing and confusing. Why did the Hierarchy want to do things like this? Why, the Commoners had laughed! The deacons in the crowd had shut them up pretty quickly. But they had laughed.

Cousin Deth strolled up, followed by priests.

"And now that your reverences have edified the mob with this little display," he was saying, "perhaps we can carry through the original instructions given us by the archpriest Goniface."

"Given *you*, you mean!" one of the young priests retorted hotly. "We all had our orders from Sanctuary Control Center and the Apex Council. We were told to proceed in the usual manner."

Deth surveyed him coolly. "But you see, your reverence, this is not the usual haunted house, set up for you to knock down. This, I fear, is a kind of war, your reverences. And perhaps war is something that only a contemptible and misbegotten deacon knows how to dirty his hands with: Unlimber the zero-entropy spray, Brother Sawl!"

A long, light, slim projector was attached to the container which had originally been carried behind Deth. Brother Chulian felt the chill strike through his Inviolability field, and he edged away, shivering.

"A brief medium spray over the whole building," Deth was directing. "Enough to stiffen the outer walls. Then full intensity straight ahead. We'll make our own doorway. Ready? Very well. Brother Jafid, speak your piece!"

Brother Jafid's voice, mightily amplified, was unpleasantly sweet.

"Let the Waters of Perfect Peace infold this place. Let them lull its unrest. Let them draw from it all motion and all evil."

With a faint screaming sound of almost inaudibly high pitch, suggestive of ice scraping ice, the zero-entropy projector opened up. Snowflakes and flakes of frozen air traced the widening path of its spray. The haunted house was engulfed in a swirling miniature snowstorm. Back from it rebounded a blast of arctic cold. The crowd, tight-packed as it was, seemed to draw back still farther, huddling.

The path of the spray narrowed, concentrated around the doorway, crusted it frostily. Then the faint screaming ceased.

A priest walked up to that gleaming, icily opalescent patch and rapped it smartly with his rod of wrath. The hyperfrozen materials shattered, leaving a large, jagged-edged hole. The priest ran his rod around the edge, knocking down splinters, which tinkled like icicles as they fell.

"Now we can proceed," said Deth sharply. "Projector and rods first. Keep together. Watch for traps. Wary of doors. Listen for my orders. If the young witch is found, inform me at once."

Then, just as they were starting, he noticed Brother Chulian standing to one side, and his thin lips stiffened into a cruel smile.

"Oh, your reverence, I had almost forgotten! This was the very thing you wanted so much to see. You shall have the place of honor. Lead the way, Brother Chulian!"

"But—"

"We are waiting for you, Brother Chulian. All Megatheopolis is waiting."

Brother Chulian yielded. He could not hold out against the hostile gaze of those little sardonic eyes. And the presence of the crowd and the other priests would have made resistance highly embarrassing.

Nevertheless, it was very unfair.

Reluctantly he picked his way through the frost-bitten weeds. Cold trickled upward around his ankles through the lower orifice in his Inviolability field, urging his knees to tremble.

Unwillingly he studied the house, whose frosted walls were already beginning to steam in the hot sunlight. Even in its present dilapidated state, the haunted house had a certain beauty of proportion. But its potential fluidity was very repugnant to one used to the ponderous, rigid plastics of Hierarchy architecture.

Somewhere he had read of the adjustable houses of the Golden Age, with elastic walls made tensile by force fields, akin in structure and motivation to the mobile figure of the Great God on the Cathedral.

But the idea did not appeal to Brother Chulian. To a considerable degree he shared the Commoner's fear and awe of the Golden Age and its proud inhabitants. They must have been as unpredictable and self-willed as their houses —rebellious and critical like Brother Jarles, brazen and mocking like that witch woman.

Chulian believed that it would have been extremely unpleasant to have lived in the Golden Age, with your own free individuality continually threatened by that of everyone else, and with no Hierarchy to plan your life and guarantee your security.

He was very close to the ice-rimmed

opening. What if the ancient dwellers had come alive with the house? Silly thought. And yet—

"If the interior shows signs of movement, we'll be giving it a light entropy spray to freeze it, your reverence," he heard Deth call to him. "You'd better step lively if you don't want your Inviolability field to go into stasis, your reverence."

Hurriedly Chulian entered the haunted house and ducked through the first interior doorway he caught sight of. It would be just like the mean little deacon to carry out his threat, and the thought of being held helpless in a rigid field, even temporarily, in this place, was distinctly disturbing.

It was dusty and dark. The feeble glow of his halo partly revealed a domed chamber of moderate size, with furnishings whose colors had faded with the centuries, but whose general lines still conveyed an impression of graciousness and comfort. Dust, churned up by the recent commotions, was everywhere resettling thickly. The floor gave slightly under his feet.

Despite his general revulsion, the room exercised an odd fascination on Brother Chulian. Some features seemed almost attractive. Particularly a certain couch, which looked rather like the bed in his luxurious little cell in the Hierarchy.

A chilling sound, as if someone had grated his teeth just behind him, made him whirl around. There was no one there.

But the door had vanished. He was cut off from the others.

His first thought was, "What if the walls should close in, and in, and in." It was only the outer ones that had been affected by the spray.

The couch which had first attracted his attention began to creep toward him, oozing across the dusty floor like a gigantic snail.

With a hysterical little gasp of choking, panic-inspired laughter Chulian dodged past it. It changed its course to follow him. Faster.

There were no doors. He tried to get solider pieces of furniture between him and the thing. It shoved them aside. He darted past it again. It swerved toward him quickly, as if it were a very intelligent, evil slug. He tripped, fell awkwardly, managed to scramble up, dart blindly forward.

It had him trapped in a corner. Very slowly now, as if gloating over his terror, the couch writhed closer, suddenly reared up, quaking obscenely, and thrust out stubby arms toward him—a vile personification of the fleshly comforts so dear to Chulian. Then it embraced him.

Its pressure against his chest activated the controls of his Inviolability field, switching it off. His halo, carried by the funnellike extension of the field above his head, was automatically extinguished.

Darkness, then, and the suffocating, obscene endearments of the thing. Desperately he fought against it, straining his head backward, pushing out wildly.

If it touched his face he would go mad. He knew it.

But it did touch his face. Gently at first, recalling the feel of Sharlon Naurya's fingers. "Good-by, Little Brother Chulian."

Then tighter and tighter, stranglingly, crawling over his mouth. And Brother Chulian wished he would go mad.

One useless thought insisted on staying in his mind. If he ever escaped, he would never again be able to sleep easily on his little bed in the Sanctuary.

Abruptly the pressure receded. A door appeared in the wall ahead, letting in wan light. He stared at it stupidly, swaying, feeling as weak as water. Then the realization that escape was possible penetrated his fear-numbed mind. He staggered forward.

Just outside the door he was bowled over by a scarlet tide of fleeing priests. Cousin Deth was in their midst. From the floor Chulian caught one glimpse of a distorted, sallow face, white showing all around the eyes.

Cousin Deth was screaming, "The

thing! The thing in the hole!"

Painfully Chulian half-scrambled, half-crawled after them, out through the chilly, ragged doorway.

In his ears thundered the uncontrollable, crazy laughter of the crowd.

Nimbly, the fingers of the Black Man rippled over the banks of close-set controls. His glistening eyes scanned the tenuous solidographic miniature of the haunted house set in front of him. Through the faintly projected walls he watched the tiny scarlet-robed manikins flee from the place, disappearing abruptly as they got outside the visual field of the mechanism. Watched the last of them hobble after.

His intense concentration took the form of a very gleeful, but rather taut smile. Snub nose and short, bristling, red hair emphasized the impression of impishness.

He murmured a swift aside to his companion: "I am becoming very fond of that tubby little man. He scares so beautifully." He jerked backward. The little scene had erupted with blinding light.

"At last they blast the place," he cried. "But Sathanas always laughs last!"

And lifting a microphone to his lips, he howled manically.

It was as if a volcano had erupted in the little Square. The haunted house glowed, flared, writhed, melted. The four priests on the knoll had finally received orders to get their warblast into action. But its smoky red flare was more suggestive of hell than heaven, and from the crowd opposite came screams of agony, where a momentary puff of its carelessly handled heat had inflicted serious burns. Each narrow street was jammed by fear-crazy, fleeing Commoners. Others were seeking to scramble onto the roofs of surrounding houses.

The haunted house collapsed, ceased to be.

But from the flaming, heat-blasted ruins rose a shuddering, triumphant laughter.

The Black Man switched off the master controls and stood up, eying the great keyboard with regret.

"Too bad its usefulness is over. It was a lot of fun to operate. I shall miss it, Naurya."

"But it was certainly worth it." She was looking at him seriously.

"By Sathanas, yes! Commoners laughing at priests—that's a major achievement. Though the poor devils will be sorry they laughed, when the Hierarchy doubles the tithes. But it was a very neat little instrument, just the same, and I have a right to mourn its passing. See, that top bank controlled the walls; the next one below it, floors and ceilings. You mightn't believe me if I told you how many hours of practice I put in before I developed the technique required for such stunts as bouncing that first chap upstairs and out again. Quite a problem in timing.

"Third bank—windows and doors. Fourth—ventilators, and such furniture as we decided to animate. Including Brother Chulian's overaffectionate couch." He patted a half dozen keys tenderly.

"Tell me," asked Sharlson Naurya, leaning forward curiously, "did the people of the Golden Age usually have houses that played such tricks?"

"Asmodeus, no! They were just a fad, I imagine, and a very expensive one. The idea was to have a house whose shape you could change to suit your fancy. Say you had a big crowd in for a party and needed a larger ballroom. You just activated the proper controls and—presto!—the walls would recede. And why not make it an oval or octagonal room while you were at it? Just as easy!"

He laughed happily.

"Of course, it all worked in slow motion. But when our investigations showed that the old equipment was still pretty much in order, it was very simple to shove in more power and speed up the tempo, so that the old place could dance a jig if we wanted it to. Then we hitched up our remote controls, and there we were!"

Sharlson Naurya shook her head. "I can't get over thinking that there's something disgusting about the luxury of a house like that. Imagine summoning a chair across the room because you were too lazy to walk! Or changing the shape of a couch to ease a crick in your back! Sounds too voluptuous." She wrinkled her nose in disgust.

Looking like some ancient jester, in his black tunic which left arms and legs bare, the Black Man spun around and pointed a mocking finger at her.

"You've been bitten by the toil-for-its-own-sake morality that the Hierarchy dredged out of the dirty past!" he accused laughingly. "But for that matter, none of us can escape it. I'm glad that in my case it took the form of an urge to play exceedingly laborious and complicated practical jokes. By Satan, when I think of the tricks I played or tried to play! My priestly schoolmaster must have been a long-suffering old codger, or he'd have blasted me out of existence. Even at that, I'd never have grown to manhood, if I hadn't found the Witchcraft. That saved me."

Naurya studied him intently, leaning her arm lightly on the edge of the control panel that occupied much of the tiny, bare-walled, windowless room. He lolled back across the padded seat in front of the controls—the only piece of furniture in the room—eying her humorously. She seemed much wiser and more experienced than he, with her coldly purposeful features and enigmatic eyes. It would have taken long association with both, before one learned to recognize her underlying youthful, almost naive, seriousness, or his basic realism, thoughtfulness, and laughter-armored sensitivity.

"Are practical jokes your life's goal?" she asked finally. "I watched you all the time you were operating this thing. As you peered down at those scuttling scarlet little images, you kept smiling as if your sole ambition in life were to play at the malefic demigod."

"You've touched my weakness there!" His laughter was a marvelously flexible instrument. "But the telesolidograph always gives you that godlike feeling. You must have felt it yourself. Confess!"

She nodded soberly. "I did. How does it operate? That was the first time I ever saw one."

"So?" He lifted his eyebrows. "I would have thought otherwise, since you are so close to Asmodeus."

She shook her head. "I know nothing of Asmodeus."

He looked at her sharply. "He takes a very special interest in you, as if you were one of the most important of us." She did not answer. "But you know the job he's saving for you, Naurya. Do you mean to say that Asmodeus informed you of that job in the same manner that he informed me—by indirect communications?" He watched her for a moment longer, then shrugged his shoulders carelessly. "I can believe you don't know him. I've never met witch or warlock who did, myself included—and in one sense I'm his second in command. Just orders from above, that's all he is to any of us. An invisible fountainhead of instructions. The great mystery." His voice had a faintly sarcastic, jealous tinge. He changed position, snapping his fingers restlessly. "But if Asmodeus gives you the run of our headquarters here and asks me to look out for you, I suppose it's quite proper for me to tell you about the telesolidograph. It's simple, really. The Hierarchy's solidograph is a three-dimensional motion picture. The telesolidograph is the same sort of thing, except that the primary multiple-beam is invisible, long-range, and highly penetrative, only transforming to a visible, three-dimensional image when it reaches the focus. Slightly analogous to a needle-point spray. So, as happened, if we want bare feet scampering around, or what not, we just fake a solidograph of them, and feed the tapes into the projector here. Phantoms to order! Vocal manifestations work in about the same way.

"The instrument I used is a bit more complicated, of course. Two-way. Viewer and projector. So I'd have a miniature image of the general focal region here to guide me in operating my life-size phantoms and manipulating the remote controls of the house.

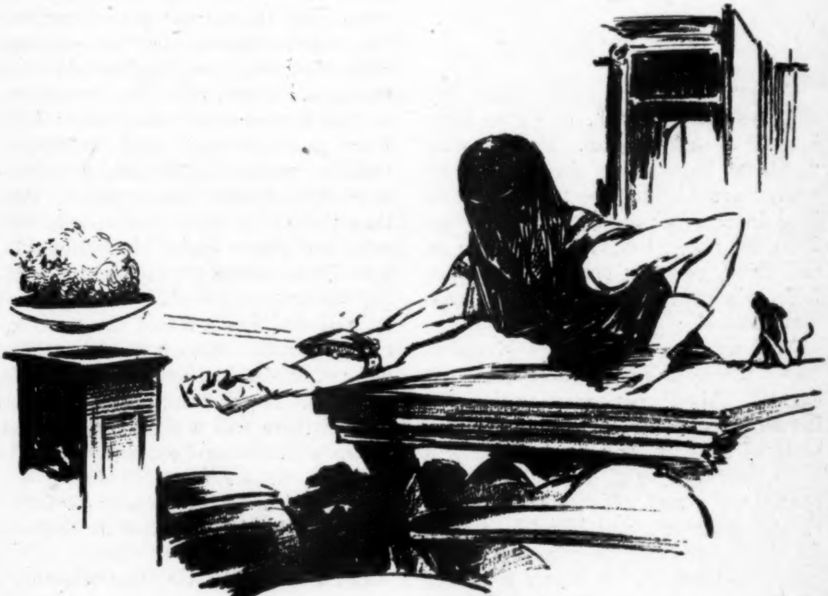
"All our tricks are like that, Naurya. Relatively slight improvements on Hierarchic science. As soon as the priests get on the right track, it'll only be a matter of time before they find the answers. They've started already. Zero-entropy to put the walls in stasis wasn't a bad dodge.

"That's why, in handling the haunted house, I went light on telesolidograph—one of our real trumps, worth holding up—and heavy on house controls, which we couldn't have hoped to keep a mystery. Only used telesolidograph on the first chap—and on Deth." He smiled reminiscently. "Odd that such a trivial thing should scare our dear deacon. But when Asmodeus sends you a detailed fear-biography of a man, it isn't difficult to put your finger on the weak spot—even of such a cruel crook as the deacon. What's the matter, Naurya? He one of your pet hates?"

She shook her head, but her eyes stayed as stonily hating.

"The man behind him," she said softly.

"Goniface? Why? I know, of course, that the special job for which you're being saved involves Goniface. Something personal about it? Maybe revenge?"



She did not answer. He stood up.

"A little while ago you asked me about my aims. What are yours, Sharlson Naurya? Why are *you* a witch, Persephone?"

She took no notice of the questions. A few moments, and her expression changed.

"I wonder what is happening to Armon Jarles."

He looked at her quickly. "Does he figure in your aims? You were hurt when he balked last night. Are you in love with him?"

"Perhaps. At least, he has a deeper motivation than the urge to play practical jokes. There's something firm-rooted about him, solid as a rock!"

The Black Man chuckled. "Too solid. Though I was sorry we lost him. Sathanas, but we need men! Men of ability. And it's just those that the Hierarchy grabs."

"I wonder what is happening to him," she persisted.

"Unpleasant things, I fear."

VI.

Armon Jarles crouched where the shadows were darkest, trying to force himself to make a plan. But the deep wrath-ray burn on his shoulder had already started a fever, so that the throbbing dance music and squealing laughter from the house behind him became an evil thing, weaving chaotic, uncontrollable, nightmarish visions in his pain-racked mind.

This was the only part of Megatheopolis where cufew violations were tolerated. This district sacred to the ministrations of the Fallen Sisters. This place of slinking forms, priests without halos, cracks of light, doors that swiftly opened and closed, whistles, whisperings, throaty greetings, and invisible, unjoyful merriment, with overtones of a desperate melancholy. A wanly beautiful, flimsily clad girl, standing in a lighted doorway, had seen him pass. There must have been something frightening about his face, something hunted about his manner, for her eyes had gone wide with terror and she had screamed, once again bringing pursuit down upon him.

For a moment they were off on a false scent, beating up another street. But they would be back. They would be back.

He must think of a plan.

Fever dulled hunger, but his throat was dry. Ill-made sandals cut his swollen feet. He had not realized how two years in the Sanctuary had softened him.

But other pains were nothing to the rasping of the coarse, stolen tunic against his unbandaged shoulder.

He must make a plan.

He had thought of leaving Megatheopolis. But neatly cultivated fields offered poor concealment, and if the farmers proved themselves half as hostile to him as the Commoners of Megatheopolis had— No, he must stick it out here. If only he could manage to—

But a wailing, agonized, long-drawn-out swell in the sultry music conjured up an evil vision of his mother's work-worn face. Even now it was hard for him to realize that she had betrayed him. That his father and brother had done the same. Home. The one place where he had been sure he could find refuge. Even their obviously cold, unfriendly, panicky reaction to his sudden appearance had not put him on guard. And then their over-crafty pretense at welcome had almost fooled him. But sidewise glances—and that matter of sending his brother off on an unexplained errand—had finally forced him to recognize the truth. Almost too late. That was when he had gotten the wrath-ray burn. It was then, too, that he had learned there was a price on his head, a price which every Commoner lusted to earn.

He had had to grapple with his father and knock him down, when the old man tried to hold him.

His mother's shadowy face, like something seen through heat waves, seemed to leer at him in the darkness. He reached out his hand to brush it away.

Perhaps, he told himself, feeling all the while that the universe was crazily tipping, he ought to be glad they had acted as they did. It showed that, deep in their beings, the Commoners nursed for the Hierarchy a hate almost beyond belief. A priest backed by the Hierarchy was something to fear, to fawn upon, almost to worship. But a priest whom the Hierarchy cast out—their one chance to give expression to their hatred.

It was Commoners who were pursuing him now. Commoners led by deacons. But Commoners.

Two years ago he had passed his examinations and set out, a starry-eyed idealist, his head crammed with determinations to improve the morality and living conditions of the Commoners and to do his part in hastening the New Golden Age. He had thought of himself as helping his family. During the two years that followed, the emotional ties joining him to them had never been completely broken.

But on that same day he had set out, his family had looked upon him as someone lost to them forever, who could never mean anything to them again—dead, become something more and less than a man—a priest—inhuman.

"Look! There he is!"

He shrank, blinking, from the searchbeam. Pain lashed through his stiff muscles as he lunged into a run and darted up the alley across the street. A wrath ray sizzled against the far wall.

Cobbles. Bite of the sandal thongs. Rasp of the tunic. His hurt arm dangling. Darkness. Rectangle of light. A woman's painted face. Screams.

Running. Running. Running.

Sudden swell in the shouts behind him, as they reached the mouth of the alley. Violet needle of a wrath ray over his head.

But before it chopped down into him, he had swerved into the next street, crossed it, and plunged into the ruined area toward which he semiconsciously had been heading.

Rubble. Matted weeds. Feeling his way. Great blocks of stone and fractured plastic. Ragged wall that might have been erected before the Golden Age. Narrow, twisting spaces. Blind alleys. A maze built by the dilapidation of mighty structures.

Shouts from behind. Circle of light just above his head, against a vast, jagged block. Ducking. Wriggling. Crawling.

More shouts, very close. Panicky rush for cover. Flood of pain, like blinding light, as his burnt shoulder rammed rock. Biting his cheek to hold back the scream. Salt taste of blood.

From that point onward he had no object but to burrow deeper and deeper into the ruins. Always to take the darkest and narrowest turning available. Sometimes the shouts moved away. Sometimes they drew close. That in the course of his aimless progress he would eventually crawl into the hands of his pursuers, was a kind of reasoning that no longer held significance for him.

It seemed to him he could still hear the dance music, throbbing in rhythm with his shoulder, screeching obscenely, wailing raucous despair. And the whole universe was dizzily swaying to the tune. He wanted to dance, too, but it hurt too much. He was someone else. He was Armon Jarles, but Armon Jarles was someone else. His father—his father was an archpriest. Those grim old arms were hugging him and would not let him go. His brother was a chubby, cooing little baby, named Brother Chulian. His mother—

A beautiful girl stood in a doorway, smiling at him, beckoning. Closer and closer he edged, his suspicions melting. Then she reached suddenly forward, and caught his hurt shoulder, and wrenched it, and from behind her poured a tide of scarlet robes. And her features grew old and work-worn, and his mother, dressed in a tawdry tunic, leered at him.

But her features were getting too old, much too old even for his mother. Cheeks were sinking, lips puckering, nose growing to a thin beak, chin becoming a brown knob.

"Wake up, Brother Jarles!" A cracked whisper.

Something was wrong with the face. It was real, and he did not want to look at reality now. But the hand kept hurting him. He tried to push it away, looked up, saw, in the glow of a searchbeam striking above the narrow passageway, the same crone-face, recognized it.

"Come with me, Brother Jarles! Come with Mother Jujy!"

Almost, he smiled.

"I'd sooner you had the reward than my father," he murmured.

A bony palm was clapped over his mouth.

"You'll bring them down on us! Get up, Brother Jarles! It's not far, but we must hurry, hurry!"

It was less painful to get up than to lie there and be tugged at. After a little while he managed it, though the effort made the darkness reel dizzily and brought back the visions. As he staggered along beside her, leaning on the skinny shoulder, it seemed to him that she kept changing. First his mother. Then Sharlson Naurya. Then Mother Jujy. Then his mother—

"Let me call them," he said, smirking foolishly. "No need to look for them. Just let me call them and they'll come. Then—just think—you'll have the reward all to yourself—the whole reward. Or are you afraid they'll cheat you out of it?"

For answer, he was struck across the mouth with a cane.

"There he goes! There he goes! Someone with him!"

Sudden turn into a side passageway. Eager voices baying from all directions. Another sharp turn. Then he saw Mother Jujy tugging at the weeds, tilting up a whole section of them.

"In! In!"

The blow had given him a little sense. He let himself down into the black hole she had uncovered, half-climbed, half-slipped down a short ladder, rolled away from the bottom of it, lay there.

The shouting was cut off. Pitch darkness. Silence.

After a while a light was struck, and he saw the ancient face grinning toothlessly at him over a candle flame.

"So you see how Mother Jujy claims her reward, Brother Jarles!" she cackled. "Mother Jujy turned you in, didn't she? Oh, yes!"

She hobbled over to him and poked at his shoulder, lifting the cloth. He gritted his teeth.

"I must fix that," she mumbled. "Fever, too. But we must go a ways first. Drink this."

She put a little bottle to his lips. The fiery liquid made him gag and gasp.

"Burns, doesn't it?" she observed gleefully. "Not like the wines of the Hierarchy, is it? Mother Jujy makes her own nectar. Mother Jujy has a still."

He looked around.

"Where are we?"

"In one of the tunnels of the Golden Age," she replied. "Don't ask me what they were for. I don't know. But I know what they're for *now*." She giggled slyly, bobbing her head. "Just ignorant old witches! The priests know all about us! Oh, yes!"

He stared at her, puzzledly.

"Ah, don't bother your addled wits, Brother Jarles. Just come with Mother Jujy."

He followed her. In places the tunnel was almost whole—a circular tube of dull metal, big enough to stand in. More often it was cracked, and floored with dirt. Once or twice they passed crude shorings, obviously recent.

The trip seemed endless. Before it was over, he was very sick. His fever had gone up, fanned by exertion and perhaps by Mother Jujy's flaming nectar.

He began to stumble. The visions came back. Only now Sharlson Naurya walked at his side, in darkly gleaming raiment. They were King and Queen of Hell, making a tour of the Underworld, conducted by their prime minister, Mother Jujy, whose cane had become a staff coiled with living serpents. Behind them walked a man who was all blackness. And around their feet gamboled half-human apes.

Another ladder. Mother Jujy driving him up it. A narrow bed like a box with one side open. Short for him, but wonderfully soft. Against his tortured shoulder the blissful coolness of a bandage soaked with a dark, aromatic liquid.

Momentary twitch of fear because he had never been doctored by anyone but a priest. The priests doctored everyone. Something warm trickling down his throat. Softness. Sleep.

His next conscious moment, omitting feverish visions with perhaps bits of reality jumbled in, began when he saw a black, blurred something squatting on the bedclothes over his feet. He concentrated on it patiently until it came into focus.

It was a large black cat, washing her paws and regarding him with a stony judiciousness.

That didn't seem right. It oughtn't to be a cat. Mother Jujy ought to have something small, and furry, and alive—but not a cat.

For an interminable period, he vaguely pondered the problem. All the while he watched the cat, half expecting it would speak to him. But it only went on washing is paws and judging him dispassionately.

Gradually he became aware of his surroundings. His bed was a box, after all. A box built into the wall of a room. His view of the lower part of the room was cut off by a solid railing which held in the bedclothes.

The ceiling of the room was low, with all sorts of things hanging from the rafters. He could hear a little fire singing and something bubbling in a pot. It smelled good.

He tried to look over the railing. That brought twinges of pain, not very bad but enough to make him catch his breath.

The old crone hobbled into sight.

"So you're back with us again, eh? For a while Mother Jujy thought she was going to lose her little boy."

He was still obsessed by his problem.

"Is that just a cat?" he asked weakly.

The witch's wicked-seeming eyes, brighter by contrast with the leathery sockets, regarding him narrowly. "Course! Though she gives herself awful airs!"

"She doesn't suck your blood?"

Mother Jujy made a contemptuous sound with her gums and tongue. "Maybe she'd like to. But just let her try!"

"But . . . then . . . are you a witch, Mother Jujy?"

"Certainly! Do you think I make myself unpopular for fun?" She acted highly insulted.

"But . . . I thought . . . I mean, the other witches I met—"

Jarles' confused remark trailed off, but Mother Jujy seemed suddenly to understand.

"Oh, *them!* So you've met some of *them,* eh?" It sounded like an accusation.

He nodded feebly. "Who are they?"

She glared at him. "You've asked too many questions already. Besides, I don't know. And it's time for soup!"

While she was spooning hot broth into him, with the cat come up to sniff the bowl and follow the movements of the spoon, there was a knock at the door. Mother Jujy hissed, "Not a peep out of you, now!" She slid a section of the wall across the front of his box, leaving him completely in the dark. He heard a muffled flop, as if a hanging of some sort had been dropped down.

The cat stood up on his chest. He could feel the pressure of the four paws, like a little table.

From the room came the sounds of talk, but he could not make out what was being said.

Presently the cat lay down on his good shoulder and began to pur. Jarles fell asleep.

During the next few days, the section of boarding was slid in front of Jarles' bed many times. After a while Mother Jujy omitted to drop the hanging, so he could hear fairly well what went on. He listened to the old witch dispense dubious-sounding magic and hard-headed advice to all sort of Commoners, especially girls who sounded as if they belonged to the fallen sisterhood and who couldn't have their fortunes told often enough. He made the acquaintance, in this indirect way, of Megatheopolis' scanty and indigent criminal class, with whom Mother Jujy seemed on suspiciously good terms. Apparently she acted as a fence.

But those were not all her visitors. Twice, deacons came. The first time, Jarles was tight with apprehension. But, strangely enough, the fellow turned out to be genuinely desirous of obtaining Mother Jujy's sorcerous aid in winning back a girl who had been stolen from him by a priest. The second time was worse. The deacon sniffed around suspiciously, spoke meaningfully of the penalties for illicit distilling and other illegal activities, and rapped the wall in one or two places. But apparently that was merely his customary way of behavior, for he finally got around to telling a story somewhat similar to that of the first deacon. Jarles was vaguely glad when he heard Mother Jujy sell him a piece of magic the performance of which would involve several toilsome and degrading actions.

And once, Mother Jujy entertained a Second Circle priest. After some sanctimonious hemming and hawing, his reverence cautiously referred to certain "unpleasant mental visitations," which Hierarchy psychiatry had apparently not been able to banish satisfactorily. He seemed to be fishing for magical advice, though he never came out and asked for it.

That set Jarles thinking. He recalled a rumor he had heard in the Sanctuary of a delegation of rural priests come to the Apex Council with a tale of supernatural manifestations. Perhaps the grounding in materialism and skepticism given Hierarchic novices was not so solid after all. Perhaps the superstitious beliefs acquired in childhood always lingered on, below the surface, despite the deepest psychoanalytic probings and personality reintegrations.

He tried to remember what the Black Man had said about the use of fear as a weapon. The coven meeting now seemed almost a part of the hallucinations of fever. But he thought about it a great deal. And he plagued Mother Jujy with questions about *them,* until he had wormed considerable information out of her, although he had the impression that she knew a little more about *them* than she would admit.

Acording to Mother Jujy, it was only a very few years ago that the "new witches" had first cropped up. At first she had thought that they were directly inspired by the Hierarchy, and that the priests had decided to "run us old women out of business." Mother Jujy was intensely practical and very shrewd about most matters, and was very well aware of her status as a tolerated and ignorant supernumerary in the Hierarchy's pageant of the supernatural—though always stoutly maintaining that she "knew a thing or two more" than the priests thought she did.

After a while she had changed her opinion of the new witches, until now she seemed to regard them as not altogether unfriendly business rivals. She admitted to certain sketchy dealings with them, though of what sort she would never tell Jarles.

But as to who they were, their aims, and their methods, she had little to say. And for what little she knew or had heard of their methods—their ability to project darkness, raise phantoms, and especially their use of "little people" or "familiars"—she expressed the profoundest contempt. She seemed to consider such things as unfair and overelaborate competition, too suggestive of Hierarchic procedures.

The "little people" particularly excited her disgust.

"I wouldn't have one if you paid me!" she asserted shrilly, almost spitting. "Mother Jujy's seen some nasty things in her day, but nothing to come up to them. Creepy, crawly, snuggly, dirty-minded little brutes!"

But when Jarles asked for details she maintained she had never actually seen one, "and glad of it!"

As his burned shoulder healed, with a white-ridged pit in it, and his fever abated—slowly, since the marvelous restoratives of the Hierarchic physicians were lacking—Jarles mulled this information and the New World he had been introduced to from behind the panel of his wall-bed—a world of Fallen Sisters, thieves, superstitious deacons, and hard-bitten witches. He had come to have not a little respect for his snarly and bitter-tongued nurse, but there was one thing about her that still puzzled him persistently.

One day he asked her straight out, "Why did you rescue me, Mother Jujy?"

She seemed perplexed. Then she leered at him and said, "Maybe I'm in love with you! There's many a pretty boy Jujy helped out of scrapes and hid away when she was the sweetest little dickens in the whole sisterhood."

After a moment she added gruffly, "Besides, you were halfway decent to me when you wore the robe."

"But how did you ever find me? How did you happen to be there in the ruins, when they were tracking me down?"

It was merely chance, Mother Jujy told him. She had just happened to be coming out of the tunnel. Later she amended this by claiming to have had a "vision" of his predicament. He knew she was not telling the whole truth.

Late one evening—he felt restless and had insisted on getting out of bed and walking up and down the room, ducking and weaving around the stuff hanging from the rafters, impatient to grapple with reality—there came a knocking at the door, quite different from any of those he had learned to recognize. A lilting tattoo of rippling fingers. Grimalkin, the cat, mewed queerly. Mother Jujy drove Jarles back into the wall-bed. Then she went to the door, unbarred it, slipped outside, and closed it behind her.

It was very dark, but comforting her was a deeper darkness, man-shaped.

"I see you," she said tartly, though a little nervously, pulling her ragged shawl a little tighter against the cold. "And you needn't go pulling tricks to show off. You can't faze me."

"Grimalkin knew my knock," answered a laughing voice. "Shall I send Dickon in to play with her?"

"She'd scratch his eyes out! What do you want?"

"How is our patient?"

"Wants to get up and set the world on fire! I have to tie him down."

"And his—education?"

"Oh, I think he's getting a little sense. Hard knocks have a way with them. He's tough, though. Got a slam-bang, drag-out mind, for all he's a gentle boy. Still, I think he's softening toward you people—worse luck for him!"

"Good! You are too modest, though. You underestimate the influence of your companionship on him. We are much beholden to you, Mother Jujy."

"Beholden pudding!" The old crone drew herself up, and stuck out her shriveled chin. "Listen, I'm willing to do you people a turn now and then, because I know you're out to get the priests. And I was glad to help that muddle-headed boy for you when you showed me how and where. But there's one thing I always want you to understand: I saw through you from the first. In spite of all your tricks and stunts and gibbering little monkeys, you're not real witches!"

There was a half-pleased chuckle from the darkness. "Let us pray that the Hierarchy never achieves your penetration, Mother Jujy."

She ignored the compliment. "You're just fakes," she persisted. "*I'm* the real witch!"

The darkness bowed. "We will not dispute the honor with you."

"That's right!" said Mother Jujy, with a certain grim and vigilant satisfaction.

VII.

"Asmodeus says we're stepping up the pressure, Drick. Tonight the wolves come to Megatheopolis. Just sniff around the outskirts at first, but they'll get bolder afterward. Beginning at midnight, telesolidographs in all key cities will be working twenty-four hours a day. We should have our second one set up here by then. You boys can operate it in shifts. Fun. But watch your eyes. Meanwhile, all covens are to put everyone they've got on second-stage persecutions of priests of the top four circles. Here are the tapes listing the basic individual fears of susceptible priests holding key positions. You can attend to distribution."

The Black Man shoved across the desk a box packed with tiny wheel-shaped containers. The other young man—short, burly, shrewd-faced, and wearing a similar black tunic—glanced at the identifications on them and snapped the box shut.

"I'd like to know where Asmodeus gets such detailed information," added the Black Man, rubbing his dark-circled eyes. "If I were religious, I'd say he was the Great God—he knows so much about the Hierarchy."

Drick leaned forward. "Maybe he's in the Hierarchy."

The Black Man nodded, frowning thoughtfully. "Maybe. Maybe."

"Drick looked at him queerly. He noticed it.

"*I'm* not Asmodeus, Drick. I'm not even sure that I'm top man in Megatheopolis, though I do seem to be the first to get instructions."

"From where?" Drick put his hand on the box. "A thing like this. It's a physical link. You had to get it from someone."

"Surely." The Black Man smiled, a little wearily. "It's logical to assume, if I walk into this room and find a box on my desk, that I got it from someone. But whom?"

"That's how it came?"

The Black Man nodded.

Drick shook his head, dubiously. "We sure do a lot on trust."

The Black Man chuckled. "Still, there are advantages to the arrangement. Secrecy pays, Drick. For instance, how many witches know the location of our headquarters here? Most of them think that the Coven Chamber is headquarters. Only you and I, and a very few others, know differently. And even we don't know everything, by a long shot! So if any one of us is caught, he won't be able to give the whole show away, even if he's—persuaded to."

"They haven't caught any of us yet." Drick sounded a trifle cocky.

The Black Man looked up at him slowly, his impish face suddenly dead serious. "You're not, by any chance, thinking that's because they *can't?* You're not doubting that they *haven't* spotted some of us, and are just waiting to get an angle on the higher-ups before they pull in the net? You've not stopped praying, have you, that they haven't got a line on the location of our headquarters here? You're not forgetting, are you, even for one fraction of a split instant, that we're up against the smartest, tightest little old organization that ever was?"

Drick looked a trifle taken aback. He frowned, a little worriedly. "No, I'm not."

"Good!" Something of the impish look returned. "You know, there's another feature of our organization that's going to give the priests trouble when they begin to pull us in. Most past secret societies were organized in rigid military ranks, like the Hierarchy. Ours is considerably more confused and chaotic, with more emphasis on individual initiative. For example, I have detailed instructions, as you know, for taking charge of operations on a wide scale, in the event that something should happen to Asmodeus. Yet I've never seen Asmodeus! So you see, Drick, even if the priests caught two thirds of us, they still wouldn't be able to deduce the nature of the uncaught third. They'd never be certain that the seeming higher-ups weren't really lower-downs, and vice versa."

Drick put his elbows on the table. "In that case, you still might be Asmodeus. Naturally you'd have to deny it."

The Black Man nodded wisely. "Or you might be Asmodeus, Drick. Leaving this box on my desk and then coolly coming back to receive it from me for distribution."

Drick pondered that. Then he began to smile. The notion seemed to amuse him mightily. He gave a short laugh, like a bark. "I was just recollecting that most of the covens are going to get these tapes in the same way you got the box."

He stood up. Then he remembered something. "I've been with Sharlson Naurya. She's getting restive. Doesn't like being cooped up here."

"Asmodeus' orders again. He's got something up his sleeve—a special job for her when the right moment comes. Spend some time with her, Drick, if you get the chance. Entertain her."

"Now those," said Drick, "are pleasant instructions."

In the doorway he looked back suddenly. The Black Man had slumped a little, and was rubbing his eyes again. "Oh, say," Drick suggested casually, "if things are going to be much tougher from tonight on, why not take yourself a six-hour vacation while you've got the chance?"

The Black Man nodded. "Not a bad idea."

After Drick was gone, he sat looking at the wall.

"Not a bad idea," he repeated.

Somewhere far off a mighty bell began to toll. A mischievous smile slowly crept into his lips. He frowned and shook his head, as if putting away a temptation. The bell continued to toll. The smile forced its way back. He shrugged his shoulders and jumped up.

He seemed all energy now.

From a closet in the wall he took a rather thick, black sheath, that suggested in part a coil or network of wires, and bound it to his right forearm. On a cabinet across the room was a shallow brass bowl, with some flowers floating in it. He pointed his right hand at it, experimentally, seeming to feel for some kind of contact. The bowl rocked slightly, rose an inch or two off the table, and suddenly upset, spilling water and flowers. He smiled satisfiedly.

To his left arm he bound a different sort of sheath, one with keys which he could touch by bending his fingers back across his palm. He fiddled with the cabinet, setting some music going—a solemn melody. Then he backed away, moved his left arm as if again feeling for some sort of contact, and began to finger the keys. The solemn music squawked, became discordant, changed into something raucous.

From a rack in the closet he took down the costume of a Commoner—coarse, long-sleeved smock, leggings, boots, hood.

A thin, muffled, piping voice, without apparent source, commented, "Up to tricks again! I suppose I'll have to do all the hard work!"

"For that, Dickon, my little familiar, I think I'll leave you at home," said the Black Man.

The great bell had ceased to toll, but its reverberations seemed to linger on unchanging, like some mysterious message from eternity. Hushed and reverent Commoners almost filled the Cathedral—a place of vast and pleasant gloom, aglow with soft rosy lights and the glitter of gold and jewels, the air swimming with sweet incense. Priests hurried softly up and down the aisles, slack robes swishing silkily, bound on mystic errands.

The Black Man made the customary ritualistic obeisances and hunched himself into an aisle seat on one of the rear benches, just opposite the gleaming wonder of the organ, from whose golden throats soft music had begun to breathe blending itself with the fancied reverberations of the bell. He seemed half stupefied, sunk in an ignorantly groping meditation, chewing his tongue as if it were an animal's cud, piously brooding on his sins.

There descended upon him a feeling of peace and well-being, greater than could be accounted for by the warm gloom, the misty lights, the soothing music and incense. But since he knew it was due to radiations which depressed his sympathetic, and stimulated his parasympathetic, nervous system, he could disregard the influence—indeed, enjoy it. If he had any lingerings of nervousness, the radiations nullified them. Covertly he noted their effect on the others—the loosening of work-taut muscles, the smoothing of worried frowns, the stupid dropping of jaws.

"Great God, master of Heaven and Earth, priest of priests, whose servant is the Hierarchy—"

A devout, half-chanting voice pulsed through the semidarkness. From behind the altar, lights blared upward like muted trumpets, revealing the image of the Great God, which seemed a diminished reflection of the vaster image atop the Cathedral. The Commoners bowed their heads. From them rose, like a tired sigh, a mumbled response. The service had begun.

The pious atmosphere deepened, as response followed droning response. There was only one suggestion of a hitch—when a number of older Commoners automatically responded to the "Hasten your New Golden Age" line, which had been recently cut from the service.

The priest on the rostrum was replaced by an older one, who began to preach. His voice was marvelously flexible, one moment stern as wrath itself, as sweetly soporific as drugged honey the next. His words were admirably suited to the mentality of his audience. Not one could fail to hits its mark.

He spoke, as usual, of the hard lot of Commoners and of the never-ceasing endeavors of the priesthood to alleviate their sinfulness. He painted a simple, compelling picture of a universe in which only endless toil could expiate the evil taint inherited from the Golden Age and so keep damnation at bay.

Then all the honey went out of his voice, as he began to speak of a matter more pressing and closer at hand—the increasing boldness of Sathanas and his imps. There was a subdued scraping of feet and friction of homespun on benches, as the Commoners shifted around to listen more intently. He told them that the boldness of Sathanas was entirely due to their own increasing sinfulness, warning them of the dire fate in store for those who did not repent and improve, and commanded each man to keep close watch upon his neighbor.

". . . for none may say from where sinfulness will next spring. Its seeds are everywhere, and Sathanas waters and manures them daily. Beyond all else he loves that crop. The Hierarchy can smite down Sathanas when it wills. But there is no merit for you in such a victory, unless each of you tears Sathanas from his heart and keeps the seeds of sin dry and sterile."

Behind his mask of ludicrously painful, tongue-chewing cogitation, the Black Man smiled. The priests were so neatly trapped. Having invented Sathanas, they could not very well deny him. Indeed, the new flurry of activity on the part of Sathanas and his minions was in a way an advantage to them, increasing their prestige—up to a point—and always provided they could smite down Sathanas at the crucial moments.

On a note of stern and ominous warning, the sermon ended. First Circle priests appeared at the head of the aisles, bearing gleaming plates, and yet another priest entered the rostrum to exhort the people to contribute as much as they felt able into the coffers of the Hierarchy. Such free gifts had a special virtue.

Hands fumbled in pouches. The plates passed up and down. Metal clinked in.

The priest on the center aisle had worked back almost to the end. As he reached once again for the plate, now grown heavy, the Commoner holding it seemed to pull it away from him a little. The priest reached out farther, grasped it, and—because he was glaring suspiciously at the Commoner who had been so awkward—handed it without looking toward the row across the aisle. He felt it taken from him, and dropped his hand. Then he noted something queer in the expression of those around him—perhaps he heard the faint initial gasp of surprise—and he turned around.

The first Commoner across the aisle had indeed reached out to take the plate, but before he could quite get his hand on it, another force had taken it from the priest. The Commoner shrank back, goggling.

The plate hung unsupported in the air.

The priest quickly grabbed for it. It eluded his fingers, moving higher.

He grabbed again, standing on tiptoes. The plate kept just out of reach.

Suddenly conscious of dignity, he stopped grabbing and stared around at the gawking faces, including a redheaded fellow four rows back, who seemed if anything more oafishly dumfounded than the rest.

His attention instantly returned to the hanging plate, when it jogged up and down sharply, so that the coins jangled and one or two dropped out.

More and more Commoners were staring at it.

Abruptly it shot off and upward, describing a gleaming curve in the gloom, and overturned, spilling a shower of coins on the Commoners below. It fell a distance with the coins, then righted itself, and again hung quietly.

With admirably quick wit, perhaps thinking this a demonstration of which they had neglected to inform him, the priest cried, "Lo! A miracle! The Great God gives of his infinite bounty! To each he gives as each deserves!"

Instantly, in response to his last words, the plate swooped toward him, intent on braining him. He ducked, then quickly looked up. The plate reversed its course and made another swoop. Again he ducked, and this time he did not look up. The plate came to a sudden stop over his bowed head, like a halo of brass, and then dropped downward, thumping his shaven pate twice with audible clanks.

The priest bellowed with pain and surprise, and remembered at last to switch on his Inviolability.

The plate retreated upward and hung.

There were already the beginnings of a panic—or riot. One whole section of Commoners was grubbing around under the benches for fallen coins. Others were crowding in fear toward the entrance. While the majority were staring upward, excitedly nudging each other.

In response to a hurried order, the organist started a loud, solemnly booming melody. That would have been a good idea, except that it did not stay solemn. With a discordant bray, its rhythm changed and quickened, until—as the organist stared horrifiedly at the score and continued to press the keys in frantic bafflement—there squawked from its golden throats the seductive swing of something that all of the priests and many of the Commoners recognized as the latest ditty to find popularity in the houses of the sisterhood.

Radiations stimulating the parasympathetic nervous system are tricky things, encouraging instinctive, animal responses. Only a few at first, but swiftly more—the Commoners began to sway, to writhe, to whirl and dance in quasi-religious ecstasy, yelping, screaming, panting, grunting like animals, as if this were one of the mammoth revivals and not an ordinary religious service.

In a side aisle, a group of them careened into a priest, upsetting the collection plate he was still holding, sending coins spinning in all directions. There was more scrambling and crawling under benches. Many of those on the floor forgot to look for coins and began to roll, groaning and howling with devout fervor.

Then the organ began to laugh insanely, mechanically, and the hanging collection plate began to swoop about, skimming heads, like a brass bat, finally darting toward the altar and dashing itself with a clang against the image of the Great God. At that, a sizeable portion of the crowd broke in panic and rushed toward the door.

There was an ear-splitting roar, not from the organ, as of a thousand trumpets. Those in flight came to a dead stop. The less intoxicated dancers looked around frightenedly. Everywhere people cringed from the sound.

Then a stern voice that filled the Cathedral:

"Move not a step! There is an imp of Satan in this place. Each Commoner must be examined to see if he be the sinful one—the one possessed. Return to the benches. He who moves toward the door will feel the Great God's wrath!"

Substantiating this statement, a dozen black-robed deacons filed in to block the wide, high-arched doorway, each bearing a rod of wrath.

The Black Man, in the van of the fleeing crowd, felt a sudden change in his emotions, indicating that the parasympathetic radiations had been replaced by the sympathetics. That was not altogether a wise move. Although the remaining dancers and rollers stopped almost instantly, the sympathetics were favorable to fear. The crowd surged forward unevenly, like animals about to stampede. The rods were lifted. The crowd came to a nervous halt.

They'd always told him he would some day bite off more than he could chew, thought the Black Man grimly. Only last week Asmodeus had sent him a reprimand for unauthorized escapading.

He could use his pencil of force as an invisible lance against the deacons, or vault over them with it— Yes, and be needled in the back while he fled. He could attempt to seize a wrath rod and battle his way out with it. Its beam could be used like a sword, for defense as well as offense, since wrath rays were mutually impenetrable and fended off each other. Not good enough. Too many of them.

In a moment the crowd's panic would melt, and they'd be trailing back to the benches.

His right arm, bent at his side, moved a little, feeling for contact. He leaned a little to the left to balance the inertia of the force pencil.

A deacon toward the center of the line turned suddenly on the man beside him, rubbing his elbow. His whisper was audible: "Watch out, you clumsy fool!" The other deacon turned on him as suddenly. "You bumped *me!*"

A similar altercation started toward the end of the line. There were more angry words. Others joined in. Then actual pushes, shoves, raised fists, threats—for deacons were not trained to be as gentlemanly as priests.

And still the imp of discord moved among them, setting them against each other. The sympathetics, as favorable to anger as to fear, played their part. Fists struck out. The line of deacons tied itself into a struggling knot of men, each enraged against the rest. Some dropped their rods. Others used them as clubs.

This mysterious brawl, and the fact that a way of escape now lay open, was enough for the fear-skittish crowd. In a great ragged wave it poured out of the Cathedral.

Sharlson Naurya looked up from the luminous, eight-inch square of symbols projected by the reading tape.

"Where have you been keeping yourself?" she asked the Black Man, a little testily. "You'd never know it was a secret headquarters, the casual way you slip in and out!"

He stretched and yawned, prodigiously as a cat. "Oh, Drick suggested I take a six-hour vacation. So I've been following his advice."

He dropped down into the nearest chair.

She looked at him suspiciously. "Mighty tiring vacation."

He nodded. "That's the way it is when you're all taut and keyed-up. A little rest just makes you realize how tired you really are. After two hours I couldn't stand it. Any more, and I'd have been a total wreck."

He smiled reflectively. "I learned

one thing, though." When she did not ask what, he explained anyway. "When you can get your way by bumping a man in the elbow, it's much better than bashing him over the head."

"Must you always talk in riddles?" Almost before he could say, "Yes," she continued. "I know why I'm angry with you. Why didn't you tell me that Armon Jarles had been hurt and was in hiding at Mother Jujy's?"

"Drick tell you?"

"Yes."

"Well," he said rather casually, "you once implied that you might have a certain affection for the man, and I didn't want you to go barging out after him. Asmodeus says you're to stay put."

"You might have given me credit for a little self-control."

"I know. But it always seems safer not to. And I was planning a surprise. Mother Jujy tells me that Armon Jarles is softening toward us. I think that, in a day or two, he'll join with us, of his own free will."

"I told you he would. He only needed a little time to think things through. It's just that he's so completely honest and sincere."

He nodded. "Yes, a negativistic idealist. One more glorious misfit for the cause. But we're all misfits. I was one of the worst. You wouldn't think, would you, that I'd once been examined for the priesthood? A fact. In another city. I was all primed to break a record or something. But when the moment came, I couldn't resist giving a wildly wrong answer to every question. They had me interviewed by Third Circle psychiatrists and kept me under observation for quite a time. Then, just as I was about to run amuck really, I discovered the Witchcraft—or it discovered me. More than five years ago. I must have been one of the earliest recruits."

He paused, watching her closely. "Why did *you* join the Witchcraft, Naurya?"

But he did not surprise her into a hasty answer. "Several reasons," she said finally. "Mostly I suppose, the usual reason that drives women into the Witchcraft—resentment at having been reduced to the status of a chattel after the equality they say we had in the Golden Age. Between slaving for some Commoner and bearing his children, on the one hand, and the sisterhoods on the other, there isn't much choice."

"But that's not your main reason, is it?" he contradicted her pleasantly. "I've been studying you, Naurya. The real motive's revenge, isn't it?"

She did not answer.

"Revenge against whom, Naurya?" he continued. "Goniface? Asmodeus plans to use you against him, I know. Or is it someone else you're after?"

Still she did not answer. She was staring past him, with that queer air of secret purpose which so piqued his curiosity. That air of studying—almost as if hypnotized—something invisible.

TO BE CONTINUED.

IN TIMES TO COME

This being the first issue in which the new type face and new format are used, our calculations slipped a bit; this space was supposed to be some three times as great. The lack of Analytical Laboratory is not due to lack of space, however—it's due to lack of letters. The March issue had been on the stands only a few days when this issue went to press. Trying to offset the inevitable delays of transportation, we are pushing our press dates ahead; this lack of Lab, or a held-over Lab, is apt to be more frequent in the future.

The June issue of Astounding will lead off with a Lewis Padgett yarn concerning that surprising scientist Gallagher; he surprises even himself, when he sobers up, you may remember. This time he encounters, on semi-recovery from a heavy bout of inventing, three Martians, non-menacing type, though they insist "The World Is Mine," Grandpa, also non-menacing, but unpredictable, and a series of decidedly menacing corpses. Menacing because they're all his own, hard to get rid of, and obviously mean the machine he invented is a future predictor convinced of his early and unpleasant demise. A nice, if slightly cockeyed, yarn— THE EDITOR.

Ghost

by Henry Kuttner

A ghost in the great calculator—a ghost of madness. A trained psychiatrist to cure a machine of a psychopathic condition! But there's a saying about what a doctor should do; he didn't—

Illustrated by Kramer

The president of Integration almost fell out of his chair. His ruddy cheeks turned sallow, his jaw dropped, and the hard blue eyes, behind their flexolenses, lost their look of keen inquiry and became merely stupefied. Ben Halliday slowly swiveled around and stared out at the skyscrapers of New York, as though to assure himself that he was living in the Twenty-first Century and the golden age of science.

No witches, riding on broomsticks, were visible outside the window.

Only slightly reassured, Halliday turned back to the prim, gray, tight-mouthed figure across the desk. Dr. Elton Ford did not look like Cagliostro. He resembled what he was: the greatest living psychologist.

"What did you say?" Halliday asked weakly.

Ford put his fingertips together precisely and nodded. "You heard me. The answer is ghosts. Your Antarctic Integration Station is haunted."

"You're joking." Halliday sounded hopeful.

"I'm giving you my theory in the simplest possible terms. Naturally, I can't verify it without field work."

"Ghosts!"

The trace of a smile showed on Ford's thin lips. "Without sheets or clanking chains. This is a singularly logical sort of ghost, Mr. Halliday. It has nothing to do with superstition. It could have existed only in this scientific age. In the Castle of Otranto it would have been absurd. Today—with your integrators—you have paved the way for hauntings. I suspect that this is the first of many, unless you take certain precautions. I believe I can solve this problem—and future ones. But the only possible method is an empirical one. I must lay the ghost, not with bell, book and candle, but through application of psychology."

Halliday was still dazed. "You believe in *ghosts?"*

"Since yesterday, I believe in a certain peculiar type of haunting. Basically, this business has nothing in common with the apparitions of folklore. But as a result of new factors, the equation equals exactly the same as . . . well, the Horla, Blackwood's yarns, or even Bulwer-Lytton's 'Haunters and the Haunted.' The manifestations are the same."

"I don't get it."

"In witchcraft days a hag stirred

herbs in a caldron, added a few toads and bats, and cured someone of heart disease. Today we leave out the fauna and use digitalis."

Halliday shook his head in a baffled way. "Dr. Ford, I don't quite know what to say. You must know what you're talking about—"

"I assure you that I do."

"But—"

"Listen," Ford said carefully. "Since Bronson died, you can't keep an operator at your Antarctic Station. This man—Larry Crockett—has even stayed longer than most, but he feels the phenomena, too. A dull, hopeless depression, completely passive and overpowering."

"But that station is one of the science centers of the world! Ghosts in that place?"

"It's a new sort of ghost," Ford said. "It also happens to be one of the oldest. Dangerous, too. Modern science, my dear man, has finally gone full circle and created a haunting. Now I'm going down to Antarctica and try exorcism."

"Oh, Lord," Halliday said.

The Station's *raison d'être* was the huge underground chamber known irreverently as the Brainpan. It was something out of classic history, Karnak or Babylon or Ur—high-ceilinged and completely bare except for the double row of giant pillars that flanked the walls.

These were of white plastic and insulated, and each was twenty feet high, six feet in diameter, and featureless. They contained the new radioatom brains perfected by Integration. They were the integrators.

Not colloids, they consisted of mind-machines, units reacting at light-velocity speeds. They were not, strictly speaking, robots. Nor were they free brains, capable of ego-consciousness. Scientists had broken down the factors that make up the intelligent brain, created supercharged equivalents, and achieved delicate, well-functioning organisms with a fantastically high I. Q. They could be operated either singly or in circuit. The capability increased proportionately.

The integrators' chief function was that of efficiency. They could answer questions. They could solve complicated problems. They could compute a meteorite's orbit within minutes or seconds, where a trained astrophysicist would have taken weeks to get the same answer. In the swift, well-oiled world of 2030, time was invaluable. In five years the integrators had also proved themselves invaluable.

They were superbrains—but limited. They were incapable of self-adjustment, for they were without ego.

Thirty white pillars towered in the Brainpan, their radioatom brains functioning with alarming efficiency. They never made a mistake.

They were—*minds!* And they were delicate, sensitive, powerful.

Larry Crockett was a big red-faced Irishman with blue-black hair and a fiery temper. Seated at dinner across from Dr. Ford, he watched dessert come out of the Automat slot and didn't care a great deal. The psychologist's keen eyes were watchful.

"Did you hear me, Mr. Crockett?"

"What? Oh, yeah. But there's nothing wrong. I just feel lousy."

"Since Bronson's death there have been six men at this post. They have all felt lousy."

"Well, living here alone, cooped up under the ice—"

"They had lived alone before at other stations. So had you."

Crockett's shrug was infinitely weary. "I dunno. Maybe I should quit, too."

"You're—afraid to stay here?"

"No. There's nothing to be afraid of."

"Not even ghosts?" Ford said.

"Ghosts? A few of those might pep up the atmosphere."

"Before you were stationed here, you were ambitious. You planned on marrying, you were working for a promotion—"

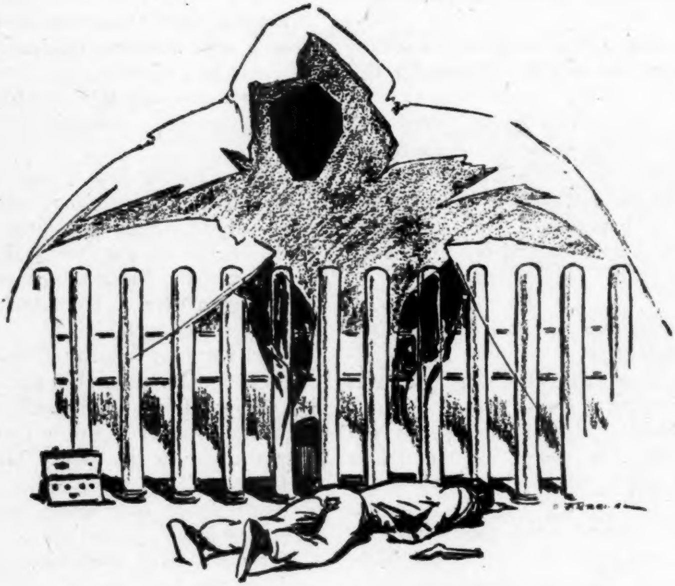
"Yeah."

"What's the matter? Lost interest?"

"You might call it that," Crockett acknowledged. "I don't see much point in . . . in anything."

"Yet you're healthy. The tests I gave you show that. There's a black, profound depression in this place; I feel it myself." Ford paused. The dull weariness, lurking at the back of his mind, crept slowly forward like a gelid, languid tide. He stared around. The station was bright, modern and cheerful. Yet it did not seem so.

He went on.



"I've been studying the integrators, and find them most interesting."

Crockett didn't answer. He was looking absently at his coffee.

"Most interesting," Ford repeated. "By the way, do you know what happened to Bronson?"

"Sure. He went crazy and killed himself."

"Here."

"Right. What about it?"

"His ghost remains," Ford said.

Crockett looked up. He pushed back his chair, hesitating between a laugh and blank astonishment. Finally he decided on the laugh. It didn't sound very amused.

"Then Bronson wasn't the only crazy one," he remarked.

Ford grinned. "Let's go down and see the integrators."

Crockett met the psychologist's eyes, a faint, worried frown appearing on his face. He tapped his fingers nervously on the table.

"Down there? Why?"

"Do you mind?"

"Hell, no," Crockett said after a pause. "It's just—"

"The influence is stronger there," Ford suggested. "You feel more depressed when you are near the integrators. Am I right?"

"O. K.," Crockett muttered. "So what?"

"The trouble comes from there. Obviously."

"They're running all right. We feed

in the questions and we get the right answers."

"I'm not talking about intellect," Ford pointed out. "I'm discussing emotions."

Crockett laughed shortly. "Those damn machines haven't got any emotions."

"None of their own. They can't create. All their potentialities were built into them. But listen, Crockett—you take a super-complicated thinking machine, a radioatom brain, and it's necessarily very sensitive and receptive. It's got to be. That's why you can have a thirty-unit hookup here—you're at the balancing point of the magnetic currents."

"Well?"

"Bring a magnet near a compass and what happens? The compass works on magnetism. The integrators work on—something else. And they're delicately balanced—beautifully poised."

"Are you trying to tell me they've gone mad?" Crockett demanded.

"That's too simple," Ford told him. "Madness implies flux. There are variable periods. The brains in the integrators are—well, poised, frozen within their fixed limits, irrevocably in their orbits. But they are sensitive to one thing, because they have to be. Their strength is their weakness."

"So?"

"Did you ever live with a lunatic?" Ford asked. "I'm sure you didn't. There's a certain—effect—on sensitive people. The integrators are a damn sight more mentally suggestive than a human being."

"You're talking about induced madness," Crockett said, and Ford nodded in a pleased fashion.

"An induced phase of madness, rather. The integrators can't follow the madness pattern; they're not capable of it. They're simply radioatom brains. But they're receptive. Take a blank phonograph record and play a tune—cut the wax and you'll have a disk that will repeat the same thing over and over. Certain parts of the integrators were like blank records. Intangible parts that were the corollary of a finely tuned thinking apparatus. No free will is involved. The abnormally sensitive integrators recorded a mental pattern and are reproducing. Bronson's pattern."

"So," Crockett said, "the machines have gone nuts."

"No. Lunacy implies consciousness of self. The integrators record and repeat. Which is why six operators had to leave this station."

"Well," Crockett said, "so I am. Before I go crazy, too. It's—rather nasty."

"What's it like?"

"I'd kill myself if it weren't too much trouble," the Irishman said succinctly.

Ford took out a celoflex notebook and spun the wheel. "I've a case history of Bronson here. D'you know anything about types of insanity?"

"Not much. Bronson—I used to know him. Sometimes he'd be 'way down in the dumps, and then again he'd be the life of the party."

"Did he ever mention suicide?"

"Not that I know of."

Ford nodded. "If he'd talked about it, he never would have done it. He was that type. A manic-depressive, moods of deep depression alternating with periods of elation. Early in the history of psychiatry, patients were classed in two groups; paranoia or dementia praecox. But that didn't work. There was no line of demarcation; the types overlapped. Nowadays we have manic-depressive and schizophrenic. Schizoids can't be cured; the other can. You, Mr. Crockett, are a manic-depressive type, easily influenced."

"Yeah? That doesn't mean I'm crazy, though."

Ford grinned. "Scarcely. Like everyone else, you trend in a certain direction. If you ever became insane, you would be a manic-depressive. While I would be a schizophrenic, for I'm a schizoid type. Most psychologists are: it's the outgrowth of a compensated complex, inferiority or superiority."

"You mean—"

The doctor went on; he had a purpose in explaining these matters to Crockett. Complete understanding is part of the therapy.

"Put it this way. Manic-depressives are fairly simple cases; they swing from elation to depression—a big swing, unlike the steady, quick pulse of a schizoid graph. It covers days, weeks, or months. When a manic-depressive type goes over the border, his worst period is on the descending curve—the downbeat. He sits and does nothing. He's the most acutely miserable person on earth—sometimes so unhappy he even enjoys it. Not till the upcurve is reached does he change from passive to active. That's when he breaks chairs and requires a strait jacket."

Crockett was interested now. He was applying Ford's words to himself, which was the normal reaction.

"The schizoid, on the other hand," Ford continued, "has no such simple prognosis. Anything can happen. You get the split personality, the mother fixations, and the complexes—Oedipus, return to childhood, persecution, the king complex—an infinite variety almost. A schizoid is incurable—but, luckily, a manic-depressive isn't. Our ghost here is manic-depressive."

The Irishman had lost some of his ruddy color. "I'm beginning to get the idea."

Ford nodded. "Bronson went insane here. The integrators were profoundly receptive. He killed himself on the downbeat of his manic-depressive curve, that period of intolerable depression, and the mental explosion—the sheer concentration of Bronson's madness—impressed itself on the radioatom brains of the integrators. The phonograph record, remember. The electrical impulses from those brains keep sending out that pattern—the downbeat. And the integrators are so powerful that anyone in the station can't help receiving the impressions."

Crockett gulped and drank cold coffee. "My God! That's—horrible!"

"It's a ghost," Ford said. "A perfectly logical ghost, the inevitable result of supersensitive thinking mechanisms. And you can't use occupational therapy on an integrator."

"Cigarette? Hm-m-m." Crockett puffed smoke and scowled. "You've convinced me of one thing, doctor. I'm going to get out of here."

Ford patted the air. "If my theory is correct, there's a possible cure—by induction."

"Eh?"

"Bronson could have been cured if he'd had treatment in time. There are therapies. Now"—Ford touched his notebook—"I have built up a complete picture of Bronson's psychology. I have also located a manic-depressive who is almost a duplicate of Bronson—a very similar case history, background and character. A sick magnet can be cured by demagnetization."

"Meanwhile," Crockett said, with a relapse into morbidity, "we have a ghost."

Nevertheless he became interested in Ford's curious theories and the man's therapies. This calm acceptance of superstitious legend—and proof!—had a fascination for the big Irishman. In Crockett's blood ran the heritage of his Celtic forbears, a mysticism tempered with a hardened toughness. He had lately found the station's atmosphere almost unendurable. Now—

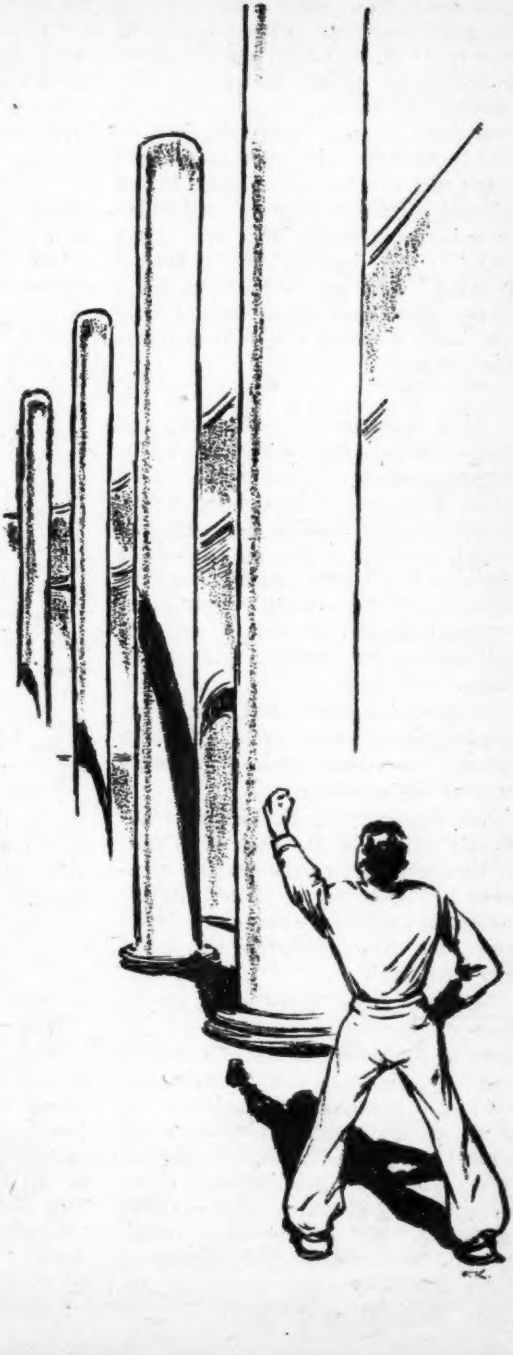
The station was a self-contained unit, so that only one operator was necessary. The integrators themselves were like sealed lubrication joints; once built, they were perfect of their type, and required no repairs. Apparently nothing could go wrong with them—except, of course, induced psychic crack-up. And even that did not affect their efficiency. The intergrators continued to solve abstruse problems, and the answers were always right. A human brain would have gone completely haywire, but the radioatom brains simply fixed their manic-depressive downbeat pattern and continued to broadcast it —distressingly.

There were shadows in the station. After a few days Dr. Ford noticed those intangible, weary shadows that, vampiric, drew the life and the energy from everything. The sphere of influence extended beyond the station itself. Occasionally Crockett went topside and, muffled in his heat-unit parka, went off on dangerous hikes. He drove himself to the limits of exhaustion as though hoping to outpace the monstrous depression that crouched under the ice.

But the shadows darkened invisibly. The gray, leaden sky of the Antarctic had never depressed Crockett before; the distant mountains, gigantic ranges towering like Ymir's mythical brood, had not seemed sentient till now. They were half alive, too old, too tired to move, dully satisfied to remain stagnantly crouching on the everlasting horizon of the ice fields. As the glaciers ground down, leaden, powerful, infinitely weary, the tide of the downbeat thrust against Crockett. His healthy animal mind shrank back, failed, and was engulfed.

He fought against it, but the secret foe came by stealth and no wall could keep it out. It permeated him as by osmosis. It was treacherous and deadly.

Bronson, squatting in silence, his eyes fixed on nothing, sunk into a black pit that would prison him



for eternity—Crockett pictured that and shuddered. Too often these days his thoughts went back to illogical tales he had read; M. R. James, and his predecessor Henry James; Bierce and May Sinclair and others who had written of impossible ghosts. Previously Crockett had been able to enjoy ghost stories, getting a vicarious kick out of them, letting himself, for the moment, pretend to believe in the incredible. Can such things be? "Yes," he had said, but he had not believed. Now there was a ghost in the station, and Ford's logical theories could not battle Crockett's age-old superstition-instinct.

Since hairy men crouched in caves there has been fear of the dark. The fanged carnivores roaring outside in the night have not always been beasts. Psychology has changed them; the distorted, terrible sounds spawned in a place of peril—the lonely, menacing night beyond the firelight's circle—have created trolls and werewolves, vampires and giants and women with hollow backs.

Yes—there is fear. But most of all, beating down active terror, came the passive, shrouding cloak of infinitely horrible depression.

The Irishman was no coward. Since Ford's arrival, he had decided to stay, at least until the psychologist's experiment had succeeded or failed. Nevertheless he was scarcely pleased by Ford's guest, the manic-depressive the doctor had mentioned.

William Quayle looked not at all like Bronson, but the longer he stayed, the more he reminded Crockett of the other man. Quayle was a thin, dark, intense-eyed man of about thirty, subject to fits of violent rage when anything displeased him. His cycle had a range of approximately one week. In that time he would swing from blackest depression to wild exultation. The pattern never varied. Nor did he seem affected by the ghost; Ford said that the intensity of the upcurve was so strong that it blocked the effect of the integrators' downbeat radiation.

"I have his history," Ford said. "He could have been cured easily at the sanitarium where I found him, but luckily I got my requisition in first. See how interested he's getting in plastics?"

They were in the Brainpan; Crockett was unwillingly giving the integrators a routine inspection. "Did he ever work in plastics before, Doc?" the Irishman asked. He felt like talking; silence only intensified the atmosphere that was murkiest here.

"No, but he's dexterous. The work occupies his mind as well as his hands; it ties in with his psychology. It's been three weeks, hasn't it? And Quayle's well on the road to sanity."

"It's done nothing for . . . for this." Crockett waved toward the white towers.

"I know. Not yet—but wait a while. When Quayle's completely cured, I think the integrators will absorb the effect of his therapy. Induction—the only possible treatment for a radioatom brain. Too bad Bronson was alone here for so long. He could have been cured if only—"

But Crockett didn't like to think about that. "How about Quayle's dreams?"

Ford chuckled. "Hocus-pocus, eh? But in this case it's justified. Quayle is troubled or he wouldn't have gone mad. His troubles show up in dreams, distorted by the censor band. I have to translate them, figuring out the symbolism by what I know of Quayle himself. His word-association tests give me quite a lot of help."

"How?"

"He's been a misfit. It stemmed from his early relationships; he hated and feared his father, who was a tyrant. Quayle as a child was made to feel he could never compete with anyone—he'd be sure to fail. He identifies his father with all his obstacles."

Crockett nodded, idly watching a vernier. "You want to destroy his feeling toward his father, is that it?"

"The idea, rather, that his father has

power. I must prove Quayle's capabilities to himself, and also alter his attitude that his father was infallible. Religious mania is tied in, too, perhaps naturally, but that's a minor factor."

"Ghosts!" Crockett said suddenly. He was staring at the nearest integrator.

In the cold clarity of the fluorescents Ford followed the other man's gaze. He pursed his lips, turning to peer down the length of the great underground room, where the silent pillars stood huge and impassive.

"I know," Ford said. "Don't think I don't feel it, too. But I'm fighting the thing, Crockett. That's the difference. If I simply sat in a corner and absorbed that downbeat, it would get me. I keep active—personifying the downbeat as an antagonist." The hard, tight face seemed to sharpen. "It's the best way."

"How much longer—"

"We're approaching the end. When Quayle's cured, we'll know definitely."

—Bronson, crouching in shadows, sunk in apathetic, hopeless dejection, submerged in a blind blank horror so overwhelming that thought was an intolerable and useless effort—the will to fight gone, leaving only fear, and acceptance of the stifling, encroaching dark—

This was Bronson's legacy. Yes, Crockett thought, ghosts existed. Now, in the Twenty-first Century. Perhaps never until now. Previously ghosts had been superstition. Here, in the station under the ice, shadows hung where there were no shadows. Crockett's mind was assaulted continuously, sleeping or waking, by that fantastic haunting. His dreams were characterized by a formless, vast, unspeakable darkness that moved on him inexorably, while he tried to run on leaden feet.

But Quayle grew better.

Three weeks—four—five—and finally six passed. Crockett was haggard and miserable, feeling that this would be his prison till he died, that he could never leave it. But he stuck it out with dogged persistence. Ford maintained his integrity; he grew tighter, drier, more restrained. Not by word or act did he admit the potency of the psychic invasion.

But the integrators acquired personalities, for Crockett. They were demoniac, sullen, inhuman afreets crouching in the Brainpan, utterly heedless of the humans who tended them.

A blizzard whipped the icecap to turmoil; deprived of his trips topside, Crockett became more moody than ever. The automats, fully stocked, provided meals, or the three would have gone hungry. Crockett was too listless to do more than his routine duties, and Ford began to cast watchful glances in his direction. The tension did not slacken.

Had there been a change, even the slightest variation in the deadly monotony of the downbeat, there might have been hope. But the record was frozen forever in that single phase. Too hopeless and damned even for suicide, Crockett tried to keep a grip on his rocking sanity. He clung to one thought: pres-

"THAT'S FOR ME FOR ENERGY"
BETTER TASTE...
PEPSI-COLA
BIGGER DRINK

ently Quayle would be cured, and the ghost would be laid.

Slowly, imperceptibly, the therapy succeeded. Dr. Ford, never sparing himself, tended Quayle with gentle care, guiding him toward sanity, providing himself as a crutch on which the sick man could lean. Quayle leaned heavily, but the result was satisfying.

The integrators continued to pour out their downbeat pattern—but with a difference now.

Crockett noticed it first. He took Ford down to the Brainpan and asked the doctor for his reactions.

"Reactions? Why? Do you think there's—"

"Just—feel it," Crockett said, his eyes bright. "There's a difference. Don't you get it?"

"Yeah," Ford said slowly, after a long pause. "I think so. It's hard to be sure."

"Not if both of us feel the same thing."

"That's true. There's a slackening—a cessation. Hm-m-m. What did you do today, Crockett?"

"Eh? Why—the usual. Oh, I picked up that Aldous Huxley book again."

"Which you haven't touched for weeks. It's a good sign. The power of the downbeat is slackening. It won't go on to an ascending curve, of course; it'll just die out. Therapy by induction—when I cured Quayle, I automatically cured the integrators." Ford took a long, deep breath. Exhaustion seemed to settle down on him abruptly.

"You've done it, doc," Crockett said, something like hero-worship in his eyes.

But Ford wasn't listening. "I'm tired," he muttered. "Oh, my God, I'm tired! The tension's been terrific. Fighting that damned ghost every moment. . . . I haven't dared allow myself a sedative, even. Well, I'm going to break out the amytal now."

"What about a drink? We ought to celebrate. If—" Crockett looked doubtfully at the nearest integrator. "If you're sure."

"There's little doubt about it. No, I want my sleep. That's all!"

He took the lift and was drawn up out of sight. Left alone in the Brainpan, Crockett managed a lopsided grin. There were still shadows lurking in the distance, but they were fading.

He called the integrators an unprintable name. They remained imperturbable.

"Oh, sure," Crockett said, "you're just machines. Too damn sensitive, that's all. Ghosts! Well, from now on, I'm the boss. I'm going to invite my friends up here and have one drunken party from sunrise to sunset. And the sun doesn't set for a long time in these latitudes!"

On that cogent thought, he followed Ford. The psychologist was already asleep, breathing steadily, his face relaxed in tired lines. He looked older, Crockett thought. But who wouldn't?"

The pulse was lessening; the downbeat was fading. He could almost detect the ebb. That unreasoning depression was no longer all-powerful. He was—yeah!—beginning to make plans!

"I'm going to make chile," Crockett decided. "The way that guy in El Paso showed me. And wash it down with Scotch. Even if I have to celebrate by myself, this calls for an orgy." He thought doubtfully of Quayle, and looked in on the man. But Quayle was glancing over a late novel, and waved casually at his guest.

"Hi, Crockett. Anything new?"

"N-no. I just feel good."

"So do I. Ford says I'm cured. The man's a wonder."

"He is," Crockett agreed heartily. "Anything you want?"

"Nothing I can't get for myself." Quayle nodded toward the wall automat-slot. "I'm due to be released in a few days. You've treated me like a brother Christian, but I'll be glad to get back home. There's a job waiting for me—one I can fill without trouble."

"Good. Wish I were going with you. But I've a two-year stretch up here, unless I quit or fainaigue a transfer."

"You've got all the comforts of home."

"Yeah!" Crockett said, shuddering slightly. He hurried off to prepare chile, fortifying himself with smoky-tasting, smooth whiskey. If only he wasn't jumping the gun— Suppose the downbeat hadn't been eliminated? Suppose that intolerable depression came back in all its force?

Crockett drank more whiskey. It helped.

Which, in itself, was cheering. Liquor intensifies the mood. Crockett had not dared touch it during the downbeat. But now he just got happier, and finished his chile with an outburst of tuneless song. There was no way of checking the psychic emanation of the integrators with any instrument, of course; yet the cessation of that deadly atmosphere had unmistakable significance.

The radioatom brains were cured. Bronson's mental explosion, with its disastrous effects, had finally run its course and been eliminated—by induction. Three days later a plane picked up Quayle and flew back northward toward South America, leaving Ford to clean up final details and make a last check up.

The atmosphere of the station had changed utterly. It was bright, cheerful, functional. The integrators no longer sat like monstrous devil-gods in a private hell. They were sleek, efficient tubes, as pleasing to the eye as a Brancusi, containing radioatom brains that faithfully answered the questions Crockett fed them. The station ran smoothly. Up above, the gray sky blasted a cleansing, icy gale upon the polar cap.

Crockett prepared for the winter. He had his books, he dug up his sketch pad and examined his water colors, and felt he could last till spring without trouble. There was nothing depressing about the station *per se*. He had another drink and wandered off on a tour of inspection.

Ford was standing before the integrators, studying them speculatively. He refused Crockett's offer of a highball.

"No, thanks. These things are all right now, I believe. The downbeat is completely gone."

"You ought to have a drink," said Crockett. "We've been through something, brother. This stuff relaxes you. It eases the letdown."

"No . . . I must make out my report. The integrators are such beautifully logical devices it would be a pity to have them crack up. Luckily, they won't. Now that I've proved it's possible to cure insanity by induction."

Crockett leered at the integrators. "Little devils. Look at 'em, squatting there as though butter wouldn't melt in their mouths."

"Hm-m-m. When will the blizzard let up. I want to arrange for a plane."

"Can't tell. The one before last didn't stop for a week This one—" Crockett shrugged "I'll try to find out, but I won't make any promises"

"I'm anxious to get back"

"Well—" Crockett said He took the lift, went back to his office, and checked incoming calls, listing the questions he must feed into the integrators. One of them was important: a geological matter from the California Sub-Tech Quake Control But it could wait till all the calls were gathered.

Crockett decided against another drink. For some reason he hadn't fulfilled his intention of getting tight; ordinary relief had proved a strong intoxicant. Now, whistling softly, he gathered the sheaf of items and started back toward the Brainpan. The station looked swell, he thought. Maybe it was the knowledge that he'd had a reprieve from a death sentence. Only it had been worse than knowledge of certain death—that damned downbeat. Ugh!

He got into the lift, a railed platform working on old-fashioned elevator principles. Magnetic lifts couldn't be used near the integrators. He pushed the button, and, looking down, saw the

Brainpan beneath him, the white cylinders dwarfed by perspective.

Footsteps sounded. Turning, Crockett discovered Ford running toward him. The lift was already beginning to drop, and Crockett's fingers went hastily toward the stop stud.

He changed his mind as Ford raised his hand and exhibited a pistol. The bullet smashed into Crockett's thigh. He went staggering back till he hit the rail, and by that time Ford had leaped into the elevator, his face no longer prim and restrained, his eyes blazing with madness, and his lips wetly slack.

He yelled gibberish and squeezed the trigger again. Crockett desperately flung himself forward. The bullet missed, though he could not be sure, and his hurtling body smashed against Ford. The psychologist, caught off balance, fell against the rail. As he tried to fire again, Crockett, his legs buckling, sent his fist toward Ford's jaw.

The timing, the balance, were fatally right. Ford went over the rail. After a long time Crockett heard the body strike, far down.

The lift sank smoothly. The gun still lay on the platform. Crockett, groaning, began to tear his shirt into an improvised tourniquet. The wound in his thigh was bleeding badly.

The cold light of the fluorescents showed the towers of the integrators, their tops level with Crockett now, and then rising as he continued to drop. If he looked over the edge of the platform, he could see Ford's body. But he would see it soon enough anyway.

It was utterly silent.

Tension, of course, and delayed reaction. Ford should have got drunk. Liquor would have made a buffer against the violent reaction from those long weeks of hell. Weeks of battling the downbeat, months in which Ford had kept himself keenly alert, visualizing the menace as a personified antagonist, keying himself up to a completely abnormal pitch.

Then success, and the cessation of the downbeat. And silence, deadly, terrifying—time to relax and think.

And Ford—going mad.

He had said something about that weeks ago, Crockett remembered. Most psychologists have a tendency toward mental instability; that's why they gravitate into the field, and why they understand it.

The lift stopped. Ford's motionless body was about a yard away. Crockett could not see the man's face.

Insanity—manic-depressives are fairly simple cases. The schizophrenic are more complex. And incurable.

Incurable.

Dr. Ford was a schizoid type. He had said that, weeks ago.

And now, Dr. Ford, a victim of schizophrenic insanity, had died by violence, as Bronson had died. Thirty white pillars stood in the Brainpan, cryptically impassive, and Crockett looked at them with the beginning of a slow, dull horror.

Thirty radioatom brains, supersensitive, ready to record a new pattern on the blank wax disks. Not manic-depressive this time, not the downbeat.

On the contrary, it would be uncharted, incurable schizophrenic insanity.

A mental explosion—yeah. Dr. Ford, lying there dead, a pattern of madness fixed in his brain at the moment of death. A pattern that might be anything.

Crockett watched the thirty integrators and wondered what was going on inside those gleaming white shells. He would find out before the blizzard ended, he thought, with a sick horror.

For the station was haunted again.

THE END.

BUYING U. S. WAR BONDS HELPS PUT HITLER IN BONDS.

Pacer

by Raymond F. Jones

To get that convoy through, they needed to move, and move fast. But the old spacetub they had to pick up—half-clogged tubes, burned-out motors—was slow. It set the pace—and a trap.

Illustrated by Orban

They came out of space into the ring of the Inner Planets. Fourteen great, gray bugs that grew like monsters in a nightmare. They were the ships of the Correne.

The lookout's call came to Convoy Commodore Ed Ingraham at his battle station. "Fourteen patrol ships are visible thirty degrees starboard, sir. I doubt they have spotted us."

Commodore Ed Ingraham held up a chart before the plate. "I have their movements plotted for the last thirty-two minutes. Would you care to examine it?"

"No . . . no, sir. I thought, sir—"

The lookout's face was pitiful in its confusion. *He* was the one supposed to tell the commodore of the presence of hostile ships.

Commodore Ed Ingraham cut him off. Incompetence! How was a war to be won with such material?

He turned on the communicator. "General order to all cruisers and freighters: Increase speed by ten percent. Throw a towline to the pacer. Correne patrol to starboard, thirty degrees. Convoy undetected as yet."

Convoy undetected—it would be little time until that report was rendered false.

Well, they had taught him at Star Point what to do in a case like this. Make a stand and fight for glory and the honor of the System. If his end was glorious enough, they might even add his name to the list of a Hundred Heroes. That was the dream of every man who came out of Star Point.

But in the face of fourteen enemy patrol ships the dream was a little tarnished—and that was heresy!

Commodore Ed Ingraham put the thought away and turned to the junior communications officer who bobbed up at his side.

"Urgent orders from Dispatching Central, sir!"

The junior communications officer snapped a hand briskly to the edge of his cap and stood stone-rigid, hoping the salute would be satisfactory to the brittle new commodore.

Commodore Ed Ingraham turned an impassive face from the chart table to the junior officer. His eyes automatically made an instantaneous dress inspection of the man from shoes to cap and caught a dull spot on the officer's metallic insignia.

The salute was not satisfactory, either. The angle of his palm with the edge of the cap was off by more than ten degrees. But Commodore Ingraham made no comment by voice or facial expression that the junior officer could detect.

He took the message and read it swiftly. The junior officer did not know the contents, but he knew by the fine lines that suddenly appeared between the commodore's eyebrows that it must be of tremendous import.

"When did this come in?" Commodore Ed Ingraham snapped.

"Just a moment ago, sir. The time was—"

"The time of reception is not on the message. You may tell Corporal Hagen that when he is dismissed for retraining at the end of this voyage he will do well to learn the simple fact that it is required if he ever intends to get another space assignment."

The junior officer paled and the seconds in command who were busy at the charts turned. To dismiss a man for retraining simply because of an omitted time of reception on a message—

"Yes, sir," the junior officer stammered. "Will that be all, sir?"

"It will—unless you think you can fill the duties of any member of the ship's command better than the gentlemen here present. Dismissed!"

Commodore Ingraham turned and placed the carefully smoothed sheet in front of Captain Walters, master of the fleet flagship, *Tycho*.

Captain Walters read the message and looked up. "Well?"

"I wonder if Dispatching Central has any conception of the importance of this convoy," Commodore Ingraham spoke through his teeth. "Twenty-four ships loaded with war materials that they demand on Earth by the sixteenth—and now this! Ordering us to pick up a pacer that will slow us down by days—and with a Correne patrol on the prowl out there—"

"Well, you don't know that this new ship will be a pacer. We are traveling pretty low, now. It wouldn't be much of a ship that couldn't keep up with us."

"It won't be much of a ship. Did you read what the message says? 'Proceed to Sector R-849-A-11, Co-ordinates 44-61-18 and pick up a miner freighting in a cargo of mineral.' A miner, freighting in a cargo—and we're to slow down this whole convoy that is supposed to have some importance to the war machinery of Earth in order to pick him up, and triple our vulnerability to attack."

"Perhaps *he*, or at least his cargo, is of some importance, too."

"If it is, we'll distribute it among the other ships and let him make it alone or come aboard us, as he chooses. We haven't the capacity to throw another towline, if we wanted to."

"That's rather bitter treatment for a man who is evidently doing all he can to help win the war. If the Correne should come across him—"

"He had no business out here in the first place. All private enterprise has been forbidden for the duration. His very presence here is illegal. As for his life or his fate with the Correne—that is not our concern. Please remember, captain, that we are fighting a war to save the life of the Solar System. Life, do you understand? Not lives. The distinction should be obvious to you."

Captain Walters flushed, but he gazed steadily into the ice-blue eyes of the young commodore who was twenty years his junior. Hard, he thought, hard as neutronium plate and cold as the void. But that's the way you made it from fighter command to convoy command in one jump without the slow, brutal thirty years that it had taken him to arrive at last at a captaincy.

But he wasn't afraid of the young commodore, and Ingraham knew it. At times, in fact, he felt sorry for Ingraham with his youthful brilliance and steel, military precision—and nothing else.

"I should think this lonely miner would bring back memories to you. When you were a kid and you and Dad Ingraham—"

"If you thought less of such sentimentality and more of military matters you would be a more useful captain to this fleet. Please attend to the directing of the convoy to the rendezvous."

It didn't show on his face or in his voice, but Ed Ingraham, of Convoy Command No. 4, was worried, and sometimes he was afraid.

He alone knew that it made him less efficient, less of a soldier, less of a killer of the Correne. And at night in the darkness of the throbbing hull that bore through space like a protective hen with her charges, it ate at the roots of his mind and in the depths of his heart. Then he was far from invulnerable to the distant memories that Captain Walters—damn the man!—had tried to stir up within him, and he longed with all his being for the days of his boyhood with Dad Ingraham.

It had not been a safe boyhood. There had been dangers and enemies enough. But there had seemed to be a purpose to things then, a purpose in their sometimes bitter battles with rival freighters who were not scrupulous in their methods of competition. Perhaps it had been Dad Ingraham that gave purpose to that early, mad, happy existence.

His mother had died when he was three and Dad had taken him aboard the *Stardust*. Until he was eighteen and entered Star Point Military Academy he had never spent more than a year all told away from the space lanes.

And since then, except for the brief months of classroom study at the Academy, he had known nothing but space fighting.

It was eight years now, since the Correne had appeared in the lonely outposts of the System and blasted to oblivion the carefully planted colonies of Earth, Venus, and Mars. Within days, they swept inward and wiped out everything Solarian on the Outer Planets. By sustaining bloody losses and bitter defeats time after time, the inhabitants of the Inner Planets had managed to maintain a front at the orbit of Mars.

But the fate of the Red Planet hung in precarious balance. When he took off for this Mars-Earth convoy, Commodore Ed Ingraham had permitted himself a brief reminiscent look up the red burning sands.

He thought, "This is the last convoy, and we shall be the last Earthmen to see Mars. Before we come again, the Correne will have blasted the Solarians from the planet and Earth will become the battle front."

Perhaps that had happened already. There was no reason why the invaders could not come from all sides, except that they seemed to have chosen to move inward planet by planet, methodically erasing Solarian life, like scientific farmers cleaning pest life out of their growth.

Commodore Ed Ingraham wondered how Dad Ingraham was. Shortly after sending young Ed to the Academy, Dad had settled down to the chicken farm that had always been his dream. They had seen each other only a few times after that and not at all since the war. Commodore Ed Ingraham sometimes yearned for that intimate companionship with Dad, and the chasm that had grown between them seemed as cold and wide as the void. The chasm that started when Dad made such a fool of himself by appearing before the Military Science Committee, insisting he knew why the first squadron of extra-galactic ships built by Earth had failed to return from their maiden voyage—and prophesied that any others they sent out would also fail to return.

The rendezvous with the miner, ordered by Dispatching Central, was only three hours away. They were fifteen days from Earth, traveling now at a bare crawl because a convoy can go no faster than its slowest ship, disdainfully called the pacer.

If this miner should prove to be a new and lower speed pacer, the convoy would be days late if they were forced to take him along—and provided the Correne patrol didn't get them first. But Commodore Ed Ingraham had no intention of acquiring a new pacer.

At the moment of meeting, Captain Walters called the commodore.

"Sighted our charge, sir. He reports a maximum velocity twenty percent less than our present speed. He'll be a pacer, all right."

Commodore Ed Ingraham prided himself on his emotionless decisions. The life of this solitary miner was nothing to him, was nothing to the Solar System when the whole Solarian family was battling for its very existence. But the convoy must get through, therefore, the miner must make it as best he could—or not at all.

Commodore Ed Ingraham took the communication post from Captain Walters. The master of the *Tycho* appeared nervous and flustered.

Commodore Ingraham noted it instantly with disapproval. "What's the matter, captain? Anything wrong?"

"I think you had better view our charge personally, sir."

The commodore stepped before the plate and adjusted the controls. Beyond the neighboring hulls of freighters and warships his vision sped out to a lone freightship moving with obvious reluctance.

"Hell!" Commodore Ingraham snorted his most violent eruption. "We'd never make it with that in tow. Why, that ship's nearly thirty-five years old to judge by her build. It's one of the old Judson freighters and they stopped making them twenty years ago. Funny"—he peered closer and drew the image nearer the plate—"she looks like the old—"

He was going to say "the old *Stardust*" but that would have been a betraying streak of sentimentality before the subordinates who were on the bridge with him.

The image was rushing closer now. He could see the deep scars on the once proud hull, one of the first of the seamless construction now standard on all vessels. The propulsion spheres at the stern of the vessel were not the uniform dull violet that would show efficiently working engines. Some of the twenty projections were visibly arcing between themselves; others were spotted with only occasional color, and some showed a dull cherry-red—a flagrant waste of power through neglect and disrepair. No wonder the ship was barely moving.

Then closer still, and the tiny scrapings of meteor dust on the hull became visible and there, near the bow, was a name. It stabbed with an electric shock through Commodore Ed Ingraham: *Stardust.*

Only with a visible effort did he refrain from an exclamation before his men. It was Captain Walters who said tonelessly, "It must be Dad Ingraham's old ship."

"Yes, it appears to be so," said Commodore Ed Ingraham. "I wonder who owns her now. Probably some decrepit old drug hound on his last legs by the looks of those props. They never looked that way when Dad and I had her. Stand by. I'm going over."

The half dozen men on the bridge had only one eye on their work. The other was on the fleet commodore as he turned the communicator to transmission and stepped into the beam.

Instantly, the interior of the decrepit freighter appeared on the screen and the image of Commodore Ingraham appeared within it. To all concerned, except the commodore, it appeared as if he were suddenly in two places: on the bridge and in the freighter. To him, it seemed as if he were actually within the other ship, though it was only an illusion produced by the communicator.

A strange smothering nostalgia swept over him as he viewed the surroundings. It *was* the *Stardust*, the same *Stardust*.

There, on the hull above his head, was the patch he had put on fifteen years before, the time when the meteor guard had gone out and Dad had nearly died while he worked in a frenzy in the one half-serviceable spacesuit they had to mend the hole.

He turned to see the occupant of the craft. Apparently, there was only one man aboard, a white-haired old man as worn out as the ship he rode. His head was bent low over the panel; his back was covered only with a tattered leather shirt.

Suddenly he sensed the presence of the image behind him and turned. He rose and straightened like a mighty, white-haired grizzly.

His white-whiskered mouth opened in a great, laughing shout that echoed wildly in the metallic compartment.

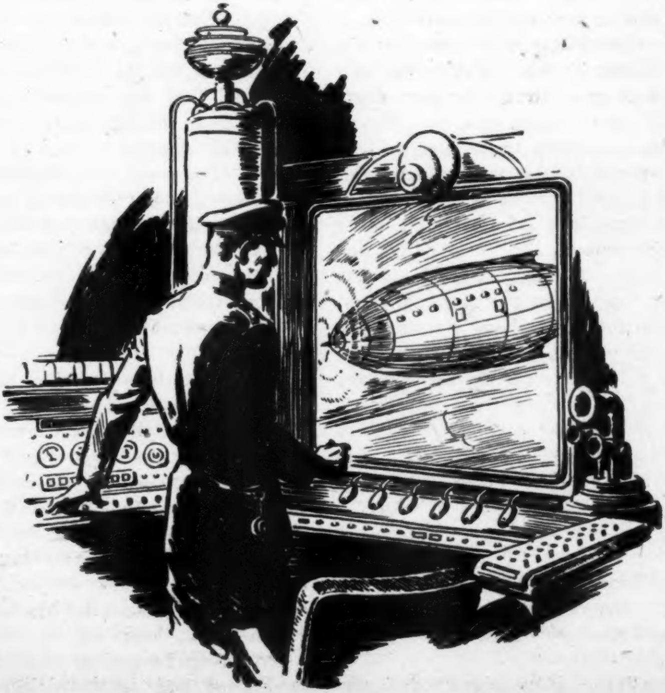
"Kid!"

"Dad!"

And then an instant, burning suffusion covered Commodore Ed Ingraham. A half dozen of his subordinates had heard him called Kid, that abominable name Dad had always used. Of course, there had been a time when it had been nice to hear him use the name, but now—

Dad Ingraham paused to set the controls, then rushed toward him. "Golly, Kid, it's wonderful seeing you here, but I guess it ain't really you, is it? Just one of those newfangled transmitters I'd heard the navy was using. Can't you get away from that battle wagon and come on over for a while? Gosh, who'd have thought it was you who'd be convoying me in after making the biggest find of my life? Gosh, Kid, if we'd only have made this when you were with me, things would have been a lot different. Remember when—"

Commodore Ed Ingraham finally succeeded in cutting in on the voluble torrent. "Sir, I must ask you to remember that this is a military convoy in a state of war, and in immediate danger of attack. Every moment is vital and mili-



tary etiquette is essential. Hereafter, please address me by title and perhaps soon we can renew our family relationship, but now to the details of your cargo—"

The grizzly-headed space hound stood staring with mouth agape. "Wh-wh-what the hell did they ever do to you in that Academy, Kid? Of all the insufferable stuffed shirts. Why, you sawdust sissy, talking to your old man like that. You come over here and I'll knock your block off and stuff some sense into it and then take you down and fan your pants like I usta. I'll be damned—" he finished slowly in utter incomprehension.

Not a breath stirred on the bridge of the flagship. Only a suppressed grin behind his back registered Commodore Ed Ingraham's discomfiture.

"What is the nature of your cargo, Captain Ingraham?" he said stonily at last.

"Thirty-five tons of crystallium, Commodore Ingraham." There was no trace of amusement now in the steely eyes.

Six audible gasps were heard on the bridge of the *Tycho*. Thirty-five tons of the fabulous mystery substance, crystallium!

It was a treasure to exchange for a planet, the measurable value of a world, a hoard beyond comprehension.

But Commodore Ed Ingraham never twitched a muscle. "A cargo of considerable value, captain," he said quietly. "But the mass is not too great to transfer among the ships of our convoy. To allow your slow pacer ship to accompany us would pace the convoy too low. Therefore, your cargo will be transferred and you may have transportation to Earth aboard the *Tycho*."

"And what about the *Stardust?*"

"She will be abandoned, of course."

"Like hell she will!"

Crystallium was to the scientists of the thirty-first century as radium would have been to those of the first century A. D.

With all the Solar planets and the nearest fixed stars thoroughly explored, the books of chemical science were thought to be nearly closed as far as new compounds were concerned, and certainly with respect to new elements.

Then, forty years ago, some lone asteroid miner had brought in the first fraction of an ounce of crystallium. A quarter of a century later Dad Ingraham had discovered nearly an ounce and a half of the substance.

Neutronium saws would cut it. That was all that could be done to it. With complete chemical and physical indifference, it turned aside all forces and reagents. But it was not neutronium. It had baffling properties of its own.

When the stuff was transported it developed minute, almost imperceptible, but nevertheless definite quantities of heat. No reaction of any nature could be observed—just that inexplicable rise in temperature.

Then, only five years before, had come the most unbelievable of explanations: the material generated heat by friction upon space itself.

Space was conceded to be a definite, if unknown, entity, and the new theory proposed that the ordinary atoms and molecules of substances passed through it like fish through a grating. But the atoms—if any—of crystallium slammed broadside through the spatial grating instead of going through endwise and thus created the temperature rise.

It was as good an explanation as any. No one could prove or disprove it and there the matter stood, except for one fact.

This mysterious property made crystallium invaluable to space navigation. Complicated and often erroneous systems of navigation were wiped out with a single sweep—or would have been if there had been enough crystallium to go around. By incorporating minute quantities of the substance into thermodetectors, an absolute velocity indicator had been devised, making intergalactic navigation almost foolproof.

Or would have done if intergalactic navigation had come. With the invasion from outer space by the incredible Correne forces, the life of the Solar System depended on carrying the war to the enemy—but the enemy's home base could not even be guessed at.

At last a squadron of intergalactic cruisers had been built with a theoretical velocity of four C. Four years ago they had departed into space and never returned.

That was when Dad Ingraham made a fool of himself by claiming to know what had happened to them and had been literally thrown out of the Military Science Committee room where he had crashed the gate.

The commodore's gig darted from beneath the protecting bulk of the *Tycho* and arced up and over the massed ships of the convoy in their tightly packed cylindrical formation.

Inside, Commodore Ed Ingraham sat impassively, eyes glued to the port. Automatically he made dress inspection of the convoy and what he saw was good—no, not quite. A cruiser in the third pencil was straggling out of line a full ship's width. He reached for the phone to order the ship back in formation, then abandoned the idea with a futile gesture—and cursed himself for his indecision.

What was happening to him, anyway? He must be getting weak. More discipline was what he needed—for himself and his men. The endless killing and struggles to keep from getting killed were beginning to tell on him. He had seen what it had done to others. Buddies with whom he had fought in the earliest space fighter patrols of the war. Of them all, only he was left. Some were alive, of course, but that was all. He would not become like them—

More discipline.

But what of Dad Ingraham? How could the humiliation he had suffered in front of the subordinate officers of the *Tycho* ever be overcome? It was vital to Commodore Ed Ingraham's efficiency as a fighting man that it be compensated for, but the problem wearied his mind and he was left with no solution.

A disturbing throb deep in his chest further distracted him when they hove in view of the battered *Stardust*. The scarred hull that had been home to him for fifteen years was as nostalgic as a forgotten flower pressed in a book. Even the scars were familiar, but there were many new ones and he saw an entire new nose section had been installed. He wondered what kind of a crash had made that necessary.

Passing around the stern, he saw the circle of sputtering prop bulbs and recognized the one oversized sphere they had installed once on a hurried trip past Ceres when none of the right size could be obtained. This one was now dark and crusted as if long dead.

Slowly, the gig approached the boarding lock and clamped to the freighter. Commodore Ed Ingraham stepped into the compartment alone and waited, silent with his thoughts while the inner chamber aired.

Dad Ingraham was older, whiter haired, more scarred, like the *Stardust* herself, but his body was still corded with iron.

The white filaments of his hair wavered in the draft of air that blew from the opening lock and he faced his son.

They faced each other awkwardly for a long time, one in the trim blues of a commodore's uniform, the other in the frayed leather garb of a space miner and catch-all freighter.

"It's a considerable surprise—and a shock—to see you, sir," said Commodore Ed Ingraham. "I thought you left space years ago. You never told me you had gone back."

"You never asked me, I guess," the old man grumbled. "Me and the chickens just didn't get along, then that trouble with the Military Science Committee came up and it's been pretty tough sledding ever since."

"Well, you did make pretty much of a fool of yourself at that hearing, claiming that none of the government scientists knew what they were talking about when—"

"And I still claim it." Dad Ingraham surveyed the trim officer sadly and there was a trace of clouding moisture filming his eyes. "Gosh, Kid, I always thought it would be different from this. I remember the time I sent you off to the Academy. We just made the nice find out on M-92 and ate chicken for a week and slept in the snootiest hotel on Mars and then took off for Earth and Star Point. Remember? And you said, 'I'll make you the proudest dad that ever mounted a prop sphere. I'll be the fightingest soldier that ever left Star Point.'"

"I've gone a long way toward making good that promise, too. Maybe you've been interested enough to follow my record. It's a good one—so far."

Dad Ingraham shook his head slowly. "Your record is good enough. You've killed more than your share of the Correne snakes, but you're no fighting man. I've seen your kind before and prayed that it wouldn't happen to you, but it has. Our brass-hat department is full of your kind. You should be up there with them soon."

"And what's the matter with my kind of soldier?" Ed Ingraham's eyes were cold upon his father.

"You're a killer. That and nothing more. A scientific killer. But your military skill will never make a warrior of you. A warrior is a man with a heart and a dream and he fights for the coming of the day when he will have to fight no more. That man is a warrior. You have become but a skillful, soulless killer, less efficient, less deadly to the Correne for all your soullessness, because you have no purpose. You fight without loyalty or love and it will be your defeat in the end."

"That's not true! All of us fight only because we have loyalty and love for Earth and for the System. Nor have we buried them beyond expression. Our fighting is our expression of them—our only expression!"

"And so you were ashamed of me before your subordinates—that's your loyalty and love."

"The bridge of a convoy flagship is no place for maudlin sentimentality. I was ashamed that my own father had not the respect for my office and the battle I'm fighting to refrain from calling me 'Kid' before my own men.

"But enough of this. Show me your cargo. We've got to get it transferred and move on. Every second increases our peril. If that Correne patrol decides to take us on, we're lost. Where is the crystallium? In the aft bunkers?"

"Just a moment—" Dad Ingraham stepped deliberately to the control board. "You're tough and you're hard, Kid. But what you got you got from me, and I've had forty more years to develop mine than you have."

"What do you mean? We've wasted enough time with talk. There's no time to lose."

"This isn't talk—it's action, or will be, if you make a wrong move. Get this, Kid: the crystallium is going to Earth aboard the *Stardust*. It's not going to be moved. Your orders were to convoy me and my cargo to Earth. Now get off this ship and obey those orders."

"I regret, sir, that it is not you who are giving the orders. I happen to be commodore of this convoy and my orders are that you and your cargo be removed and the *Stardust* be abandoned. A Terrestrian convoy is not going to be held up by sentiment for an old ship."

"Sentiment for an old ship! Do you think I'm that big a fool? I've got a reason for what I'm doing and you wouldn't believe me if I told you what it was. Now get out of here and let's proceed."

"As soon as your cargo is transferred."

"Not by your crew, it won't be moved—"

Something in the old man's voice made the commodore halt. Then his eyes went wide.

"You see, I'm not fooling," said Dad Ingraham. "If you make a false move, I'll turn the full power of the engines into those faulty props at the stern of this ship and throw them out of phase. The whole works, including you and me will be neatly blown to hell."

Commodore Ed Ingraham stood silent an instant, but it was not a long instant. He knew his dad, and he knew he was beaten. The old man would carry out his threat as sure as he was alive—and this was no way to make the Hundred Heroes!

He wondered for an instant if the long years in space had turned the old man's mind, and a fierce pain swelled in his heart. Better that the proud old giant had died in a meteor crash or an engine blast than this.

But he had his orders. The convoy would proceed with its new pacer.

Tenseness grew as the convoy slowed to pick up the old freighter. Mars flashed a warning that the Correne was drawing nearer to the Inner Planets. It was plainly visible to the *Tycho,* now.

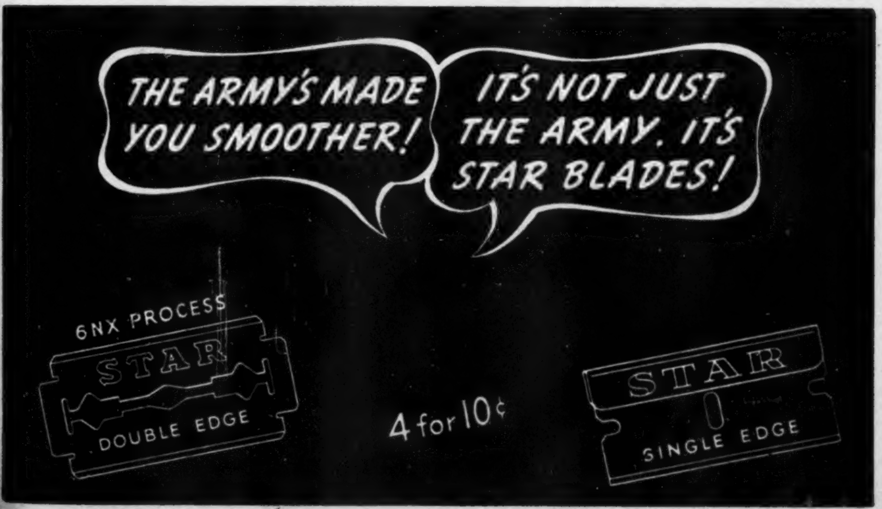
And it had sighted the convoy.

Apprehension filled Commodore Ed Ingraham as it had the first time he ever manned a fighter. But then he had been alone, responsible only for himself and his ship. Now his duty was to more than twoscore ships and the hundreds of men aboard them. It was to the men on Earth who would die if the convoy failed to get through, bringing the critical materials needed for weapons.

This battle was the greatest test he had yet faced and he knew failure was foreordained. No commodore of any Solarian force could hope to stand before the overpowering force that was bearing down. He wondered if his name would make the Hundred Heroes now—and suddenly realized he didn't give a damn if it did or not.

He ordered battle stations fully manned full time. Every freighter carried its own guns and gun crews, but they were of little value in a convoy battle for it was difficult for them to fire through the protective cylinder of fighting ships. It was only when those fighting ships were downed that the freighters used their own guns for a last-ditch struggle.

But now their crews looked apprehensively to the heavens and inspected their weapons with meticulous precision.


THE ARMY'S MADE YOU SMOOTHER!
IT'S NOT JUST THE ARMY. IT'S STAR BLADES!
6NX PROCESS
STAR
DOUBLE EDGE
4 for 10¢
STAR
SINGLE EDGE

They knew it would not be many hours until those guns were used.

The *Stardust* was the only ship without armament. Commodore Ingraham sent ordnance men and a gun crew to protect the old ship.

When Dad Ingraham admitted the men and learned their purpose he seethed with a blasphemous rage that almost cowed the battle-hardened gun crew.

He leaped for his old-fashioned voice phone. *"Tycho!* I want Commodore Ed Ingraham at once!"

There was a long, fuming wait and then his son's image appeared beside him in the air.

"Be quick, Captain Ingraham. What is it you want?"

"They tell me fourteen of the Correne transgalactic cruisers are bearing down on us."

"Did you call me to tell me that?"

"What reinforcements are being sent you?"

"None. The fleet—what's left of it—is scattered so thinly over the System that they can't spare us a ship. What do you—"

"What are you going to do?"

"Stand, and give battle, of course."

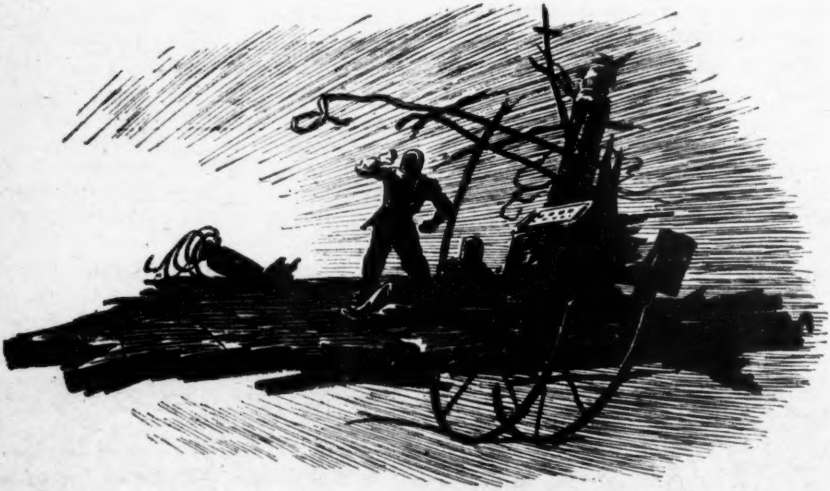
"Kid, won't you ever learn? You can't lick those ships and you know it. Remember the time when you were about sixteen and Red Marston tried to jump the titanium claim we had just found? We hid on another asteroid and let him load up until he was so logy he couldn't fly. Then we jumped him and knocked the rivets out of his hull."

Commodore Ed Ingraham could not help the instant flicker of pleasurable recollection that crossed his face at the memory of the exploit. But he demanded coldly. "What's that got to do with this?"

"Whether you fight or whether you don't, the Correne will take this convoy. Right now, the safety of your battle cruisers is worth far more than the value of this convoy, even if you could preserve it—which you can't. At the rate the Solarian Navy is dwindling, you can't afford to risk your ships."

"Are you trying to say I should abandon the convoy and try to run for it?"

"Now you're showing sense, Kid. That's exactly what I do mean. And I guarantee I'll show you how to do the same thing to this Correne patrol that



we did to Red Marston."

Commodore Ed Ingraham turned to the ordnance men. "Install the guns as quickly as possible and return to your ship."

He turned back to Dad Ingraham, and indicated the gun crew. "These men will be your armament crew until the decks are blown out from under you —which may not be many hours from now. Provide accommodations for them."

Sadly, the bright enthusiasm burned out of the old, watery eyes of Dad Ingraham. "You wouldn't do it, would you, Kid? You wouldn't believe your old man had any more tricks or fight left in him. I knew you'd turn me down, but I had to make sure. Now you'll lose your ships and your convoy and your command, and then maybe, if you don't lose your life, you'll have taken a fumbling step toward becoming a fighter.

"Why didn't I keep you with me, instead of sending you off to Star Point? Nothing was too big for us to lick in the old days. Remember? Not a one of them ever got the best of us. Together, we might even find a way to lick this thing that's smashing the System, but you've become educated in military science and forgotten how to fight. Luck to you, Kid."

He knew how they would come in. He had talked to the burned and crushed survivors of other convoys that had tried to stand before the intergalactic fleets of of the Correne. Always it was the same. They bore down in a single fighting line, until their beams found focus on the nearest pencil of defending cruisers that wove slowly about the convoy.

It was the sheer weight and power of their beams that gave them victory. They slashed through the Solarian ships before their own hulls were even warmed by the defenders. And the engineers of Earth and Mars and Venus were paralyzed and helpless before the problem of duplicating those beams with machinery that could be carried by any ship they knew how to build.

Captain Walters made his report. "All positions manned, sir, and ready to fire on command."

On the bridge, Commodore Ingraham waited, saluting formally each captain who appeared on the plate with his report. One by one— "All positions manned, sir."

Commodore Ingraham showed just a trace of tightness at the corners of his mouth. "To all convoy captains: Follow battle plan R-8. Divide at plane of attack. To all freighter captains: Fire at will upon signal. That is all."

He blanked the plate and turned away. All eyes were upon him. Those of Captain Walters shone with a bright fire and a new respect, but the second in command of the *Tycho's* crew stepped forward. He was a weaselly little man who had always boasted of his respect for Commodore Ingraham.

"May I remind the commodore," he ventured, "battle plan R-8 was disapproved by the High Command in General Order 1810?"

Commodore Ed Ingraham looked briefly upon the man, and turned to Captain Walters. "Remove that man from the bridge and suspend his command for the duration of the flight. Disciplinary measures will be taken upon landing."

There was a hard silence in the room. The mate of the *Tycho* saluted smartly and retreated under guard.

"Dad Ingraham would love you for that," Captain Walters whispered in his commodore's ear as he passed.

"Watch yourself, captain," Commodore Ed Ingraham warned.

He settled at his battle post where communication lines from every cruiser and freighter terminated. Where, if necessary, he could even control any of the fighter ships by remote control to a limited extent and direct and fire their weapons.

A fleeting weariness passed over him.

He wondered if any other commodore had ever found it hard to be a battle god to his men. He wondered if the little weasel of a mate had been right. Dared he use the untried battle plan R-8? He had originated it and every brass hat in the System had thumbed down on it because it was too dangerous in its exposure of the convoy freighters.

Material for a brass hat, Dad Ingraham had called him. Those men who sat around in well-padded offices and told the fighters how to fight.

But this was heresy. Damn Dad Ingraham! It was he who had started all this. And yet, almost unconsciously, Commodore Ed Ingraham had called for plan R-8. Did that mean that the fires Dad had stoked had been smoldering all these years?

But the plan had been ordered. To recall it would mean disastrous confusion.

To hell with the brass hats, to hell with Dad Ingraham and shortly, to hell with Commodore Ed Ingraham.

They came on. He saw them in the plates, great, snub, sightless hulls that were as expressionless as coffins and as final in their deadly work.

He was startled to find them so close. Why hadn't the lookout reported their positions before now? Then he checked again. It wasn't their nearness; it was their size. Titanic, monstrous, half again the size of any previously reported Correne patrol ships, they were the most formidable that any convoy commodore had faced.

For an instant of hesitation he wondered what he should do. Then there came to his mind the solemn intonation of the Officer's Creed that had been burned in his brain through every minute of the long, cruel days at Star Point: "I have neither father nor mother, nor brother nor sister. I was born to kill and death is my destiny."

Watching those terrifying cruisers of the Correne, Commodore Ed Ingraham thought, "Today we shall all meet our destiny."

Dad Ingraham would have laughed at the Officer's Creed. He had once said, "Kid, when you see a man getting solemn and formal, and muttering fancy words you know he's come to the end of his thinking and he's just trying to cover up. Steer clear of him or he'll drag you under like a drowning man."

"Now!"

Commodore Ed Ingraham spat the word into the communicator. Like the opening of some terrible flower, the twenty-six ships of the convoy guard split their cylindrical formation and fell away from the exposed freighters.

Stabbing out with blinding spears of light, the fourteen Correne cruisers reached for the cargo ships.

Swiftly, above and below, the guard ships unfolded and flattened their formation until they were twin planes above and below the invaders.

Then, as one ship, they unleashed every beam they possessed in one terrible instant of fire upon the enemy flagship.

To the defenders, there seemed to be an instant when the ship glowed like a paper lantern with a candle inside. Then a cataclysm of light and fire burst upon them with atomic fury.

Throughout the Solarian ships scores of relays clacked off observing circuits to keep them from burning out. Other scores cut in the cooling equipment to quench the sun heat that burned on their hulls.

When they could see again, there was one less Correne hull in existence and two adjacent ones limped away with gaping holes burned in their sides from the explosion of their mate.

Now!

The beams shifted, sought a second victim. They came to a point.

But the Correne were not to be blasted like sitting ducks. Before the Solarian fire was fully concentrated for the second time, the Correne scattered in all directions like flaming bomb shrapnel.

But there were only ten of them. The beams had held long enough to melt the eleventh to a shapeless blob.

That made two Solarians for each Correne—and six to guard the freighters. But in that first mad blast, two of the freighters had burned in sun-bright flames.

Commodore Ed Ingraham knew the ratio was not great enough. Two Solarians were no match for one Correne.

But relentlessly, the defending ships took up their positions in pairs, attempting to circle each fleeing Correne cruiser and probe the near-invincible hulls with their beams.

The Correne cruisers were faster and it was for them to choose the battle formation for the rest of the fight. Commodore Ed Ingraham watched them on his plate dart far into space in flight from the concentrated attack of the Solarians, then return as swiftly from all quarters and spear the defending ships one by one.

He watched it as a man in a dream. The terrific speed and maneuverability of the enemy vessels were incomprehensible. He watched one of them.

It darted into space, then reversed and bore down upon the convoy. He watched it growing larger in the plate, its impersonal invincibleness a thing of beauty to a military man.

Only with half his mind did he realize the *Tycho* was the target of that mad dive. Captain Walters was in direct command of the ship. There was nothing more now for the fleet commander to do.

Except think. He thought as that hellish ship grew in the plate, "In a minute its beams will open up and we'll be gone and the Officer's Creed will be fulfilled as far as we're concerned. 'Death is my destiny—' "

"Walters, you fool! What are you doing?" Commodore Ed Ingraham leaped from his post and lashed out at the tense captain who stared as if hypnotized into the plates before him. His hands, knuckle-white rested on the twin controls that governed the vessel's course and its fire.

Commodore Ingraham saw in a glance that the *Tycho* was attempting to turn aside and outrun the Correne. A rabbit fleeing from a racing dog. Already, perhaps, the Correne had held his fire merely from a sense of sport.

He thrust the tired and resigned captain aside and took the post. He jerked over the controls so hard he damaged their finger-touch sensitivity, but slowly the *Tycho* changed its course.

It turned from the right-angled path that was leading it directly across the Correne sights until its nose was aimed directly at a spot just aft of the invader's bow. It was a collision course.

The maneuver disconcerted the enemy. He attempted to swerve aside, but the Solarian held to its suicidal course. Commodore Ed Ingraham jammed home the beam controls.

The Correne lashed out with everything it had. With exultation, Commodore Ingraham noted that he had found the one blind spot which the Gargantuan invader possessed. He was caught in the dead zone of a fan of beams that cut space all about him with annihilating energy. To swerve aside was certain death.

And his own beam held. He turned up his generators until their screaming shook the air and their vibration rattled every strut and plate of the *Tycho*.

The Correne more than filled the plate now. Only the bright incandescent spot where his beams caressed her showed on the plate. The brilliance blinded him. He dropped a screen before it.

Behind him, now, the officers of the *Tycho* were ringed in stupefied horror. They stared hypnotized at that rushing white spot on the plate.

Captain Walters shook him by the shoulder. "Turn aside," he screamed, "Turn aside, commodore. We're going to crash—"

The universe vanished abruptly amid the devastating light and destroying heat of a nova.

"It was a beautiful fight, Kid, a beautiful fight! That's the way we'd have done it in the old days. Maybe you'll be a fighter yet."

Dad Ingraham's face was foggy and he couldn't make it out plainly but he heard the words and they sent a thrill of satisfaction through him. That's the thing he wanted most in the world: Dad's approval and acknowledgment that he was a fighter. No—not a fighter, a warrior. That's what Dad would have him be—what he wanted to be.

But Dad's face was fading. The misty white halo of this gray head was almost gone. And in its place there came a cold and aching blackness, a darkness that seeped into his veins and chilled his soul.

He sat up slowly. His eyes gradually came to focus on an object. After a full minute he realized it had once been the face of Captain Walters.

It was dark, and it was *cold*. He struggled up and half fell over the body of another officer.

Then it came back to him with a rush. That plunging Correne cruiser on the plate and the Officer's Creed worming its deadly way through his mind.

And the knowledge that death was not his destiny—not yet.

Dad Ingraham was responsible for that. The suicidal dive into the Correne had meant death to most of the crew of the *Tycho,* but not defeat. It was the explosion of the enemy that had demolished the *Tycho,* not her beams. It was a trick Dad Ingraham would have approved. He wondered where Dad was—where the rest of the crew of the *Tycho*—the rest of the convoy—

It was getting colder and the air was thinning. He knew a leak must be widening rapidly. He stumbled to a locker and drew out a self-propelled spacesuit used only when a ship was abandoned.

No one else was alive in the room with him. His sheltered station at the controls of the ship had protected him from the blast. From somewhere in the depths of the ship came the sound of an air compressor and some other badly functioning auxiliary engine. He couldn't tell what.

He wondered if any of the communicator circuits were operating. In the clumsy space garb, he shuffled through the shambles of the control room and tried half a dozen of the circuits. They were all dead.

He finally came to one circuit in his own battle station that remained functioning on the receiving end only. He switched it on and scanned the void about him.

What he saw made him sick inside.

Not a ship of the entire convoy remained. Scarred and burned wrecks in all stages of demolition floated aimlessly about. Every ship of his command gone. For a moment he wished that he had gone with them, for never again would he get another command. That was the inexorable law.

Eight invaders were nosing like vultures through the wreckage. He watched one approach a half section of a Solarian cruiser that hung, blind and dead. The Correne swallowed it whole in a great hatch in its side.

But now the carnage was over and the victors were preparing to depart. They had not touched the *Tycho.* Gathered at one side in formation, seven of them waited for the eighth to finish its gathering of spoils.

That meant that six out of fourteen had been destroyed—if those eight were the only ones left. That was a better score than any convoy had turned in yet against such a force.

Then he remembered Dad Ingraham—Dad out there somewhere among the wreckage of Earth's war materials. Swiftly he searched for a trace of the *Stardust.* There was no sign of her among the drifting pieces of hull and cargo that the Correne had left.

Dad was gone and all that seemed

worth-while for Commodore Ed Ingraham died.

The last of the Correne ships was slowly drifting over to join the others when he saw it—

Cruising out of the blackness, props faintly glowing, the smallest freighter nosed straight into the path of the Correne.

Commodore Ed Ingraham let out an involuntary cry in the blackness of the *Tycho*. "Dad—"

It was the *Stardust*. She had been hit. A long gash in her hull showed where a beam had annihilated a gun position. The ship was open to space. Commodore Ingraham wondered if Dad were at the controls. If so, what fool maneuver was he entering into?

Possibly the controls were jammed and the ship was floating helplessly in the path of the giant warship. The Correne paused, then licked out with a brush of flame that wiped away the entire stern and engines.

Then suddenly, from the freighter, came an alternate green and white flash—the Solarian flag of truce.

Commodore Ed Ingraham knew then it couldn't be Dad. He would have rammed straight into the Correne and died before surrendering.

The communicator was wavering and erratic, but Commodore Ed Ingraham managed to bring the beam closer. In the broken hull of the *Stardust* a bulky space-suited figure stood frantically signaling to the Correne with a hand flash. He could not tell if it were Dad or not.

Impassively, the Correne seemed to be watching him, but no sign of life appeared on the ship. Commodore Ingraham knew there would be none. Never had the invaders revealed themselves to a man—at least not one who had ever lived to tell what he had seen. Beasts or men or monsters of metal or pure force, no one knew what the Correne was.

The meaningless drama in space suddenly ended. A second flick of flame leaped out, covering the forward end of the *Stardust*. Half the ship tore away and spun crazily through space. Then the remainder was gulped into the maw of the battleship.

Unashamedly, Commodore Ed Ingraham put his head down and great sobs came for a time from him. When he looked again, the eight invaders had vanished.

Slowly and painfully, he got up and stumbled blindly through the wreckage of the *Tycho*. Not until now did he feel the hot burning in his chest or the hot trickle of blood that coursed slowly down the side of his head and neck. Half conscious of his surroundings, he was led on by a blind purpose. He was going to die. And he wanted to die on what remained of the *Stardust*, to let his bones spend their eternity in space beside the remains of Dad aboard the *Stardust*.

He didn't have to find a lock. As

PEPSI-COLA HITS THE SPOT!
GOOD!
GOOD!
GOOD!

soon as he opened the bulkhead door leading from the bridge, the air vanished in a blast that flung him into space.

He saw then what the explosion had done to the *Tycho*. Great holes were burned entirely through the ship as if a giant welding arc had been held too long near the metal. Blobs of metal hung near the hull and spun about in tiny, senseless orbits.

Commodore Ed Ingraham knew about where the fragment of the Stardust was. He had plotted it on the miniature instruments of the spacesuit before leaving the *Tycho*.

It took seeming hours to reach the drifting piece of wreckage. How many, he never knew, but when he at last saw it, it was like a traveler's haven.

A twenty-foot section of the control room deck, open to space, was all that was left.

And on that section lay a huddled, massive form in a spacesuit. He knew instinctively that it was Dad. He slumped beside him.

But the form moved.

Commodore Ingraham uttered a cry of anguish. Surely there could be no spark of life left in that form, to expire painfully hour by hour in the cold and blackness of space.

He switched on his headset and called: "Dad . . . Dad . . . can you hear me?"

"Who is it?" The voice came feebly to his ears.

"Me. Ed . . . the Kid. I thought they got you."

"Got me?" The voice was like the cracking of a stick of wood. "If *they* think so, they've got an awful surprise coming. Got me! I think they've busted my leg and burned a hole through a couple of ribs, but I'll see the other side of Sirius yet."

"If half the officers that come out of Star Point had your guts, we'd have won the war a year ago," Commodore Ingraham said with a degree of reverence, "but—"

"Don't start making fancy talk or I'll think those snakes burned your brains out, and just when I was getting ready to compliment you for a nice piece of work the way you blew up that Correne. I knew it was you at the controls. That little moon-faced Walters wouldn't have had the guts."

"Now who's making fancy talk? But I wasn't through. I want to know where your brains went while you wandered right out in front of that Correne that didn't have an idea you were in the System."

"You'll see. It ought to be about another minute or two now." The old man's voice grew weaker as he attempted to turn his head and look about the heavens over them.

Then it came. A soundless blast of light that illumined the Galaxy. Observatories on the Inner Planets checked frantic reports of a nova almost within the System itself.

On their drifting wreckage, Dad Ingraham and Commodore Ed Ingraham threw down the helmet shields before their eyes and flung face down against the deck.

And still the light burned upon them as if it came from each single molecule of matter.

As suddenly, it was gone, and blackness that was the antithesis of the light replaced it.

Dad Ingraham tried to chuckle, but it came out a croak. "That was sure the papa of them all," he muttered.

"What in the name of the seventeenth hell was it?"

"That's what I told you I'd do if you'd take your fleet and get out of here—the same thing we did to Red Marston. But nothing in the Universe could have convinced you that I'd do it, could it?"

"You mean that was the Correne cruiser that blew up?"

"Cruisers not cruiser. You can bet your last yard of gold braid that every last one of them went with that blast."

"How?"

"The convoy was not lost for nothing if I can make you understand that one thing. It's what I tried to tell the Military Science Committee, but they wouldn't listen."

That embarrassing affair again. "Dad, let's not go into th—"

"Now you listen to me, Kid." Dad's voice was like the splintering of a tree now. "Maybe I never got a fancy education, but I've picked up enough math to navigate around these parts and keep my engines in repair. The *Stardust?* Hell, I had her jimmied up that way so no block-headed convoy commodore would make me go faster than I should.

"I'm the only man in the System who's seen as much as an ounce and a half of crystallium in motion at once. I know how it acts. You take a given amount and put it in motion—the heat increases linearly as the speed up to a certain point. Then it goes up as the square. And then it jumps to the eighth power a little higher up. And if the mass increases, these critical points are reached quicker—as the cube of the mass.

"I haven't figured out what happens at still higher speeds, but I'm sure the heat continues to increase geometrically. Figure it out, then, what my thirty-five tons of crystallium did to those eight Correne ships. Years from now, droplets of them will still be settling on the planets."

It was unbelievable—and its significance was incredible, but Commodore Ed Ingraham believed what Dad had told him. He knew the old man was not lying or deluded.

"We've got a weapon, then . . . we can— But the crystallium, it's gone."

"Sure, we've got a weapon. That's what I tried to tell the brass hats on the committee. And don't worry about the crystallium. I found enough of it to blast all the Correne ships that stick their noses around here for the next ten generations.

"And if we'll quit trying to fit out our own intergalactic ships with crystallium speed indicators, they'll be able to come back to us, too. You know, of course, what happened to those that were sent out."

"They carried such small amounts—"

"Listen, Kid, when crystallium gets up around the speed of light and suddenly jumps from one heat curve to the next, all hell's going to bust loose regardless of the amount."

Commodore Ed Ingraham was lost in thought. "We could make small magnetic torpedoes that would grapple onto the Correne ships. Send them out from suicide fleets or remote controls. The enemy hits up around the speed of light even here in the System, their ships will accelerate and decelerate so rapidly—"

"Now you're talking, Kid. Gosh, if I'd only had you with me that day before the Military Science Committee, we'd at least have had ships burning up the Correne on their home ground by now."

But Commodore Ed Ingraham's head suddenly bent and he was silent.

"I know what you're thinking, Kid," Dad Ingraham murmured. "You're an officer and you've lost your command. They'll take away your stripes and degrade you—or maybe they need fighting men too bad for that now.

"But that's not important, now, Kid. The education of a warrior begins with his first big defeat and you've taken the first step. We'll stick it out here until somebody comes along and tows us in, then we'll go get some more crystallium and shove it down the committee's throat if we have to, and show 'em how to win this war. Hell, Kid, it'll be just like the old days."

"It will be," thought Commodore Ingraham, "if I haven't become too much of a stuffed shirt to know how to fight. But with Dad along, we'll make it. The war wasn't won by smashing this one fleet of the Correne, but it's gone a long way toward victory by this one battle."

He thought Dad had lost consciousness, but the old man was muttering: "It was a beautiful fight, Kid, a beautiful fight. Just like the old days."

THE END.

The Old Ones

by Willy Ley

The old, old game of invader and refugee started five hundred million years and more ago—and is still going on. The invasion of an area by a wave of new forms of animal life can be traced even today—and the flight of the refugee.

Illustrated by Olga Ley

The horseshoe crab occurs only along the Atlantic coast of the North American continent and near the Molucca Islands in the South Sea.

Tapirs can be found only in South America and in the vicinity of the Malayan peninsula, but not in South Africa, nor anywhere else.

Penguins exist only in the Southern Hemisphere; the northernmost variety lives on the Galápagos Islands under the equator. Likewise large flightless birds of the type of the ostrich occur or occurred only on islands and continents south of the equator.

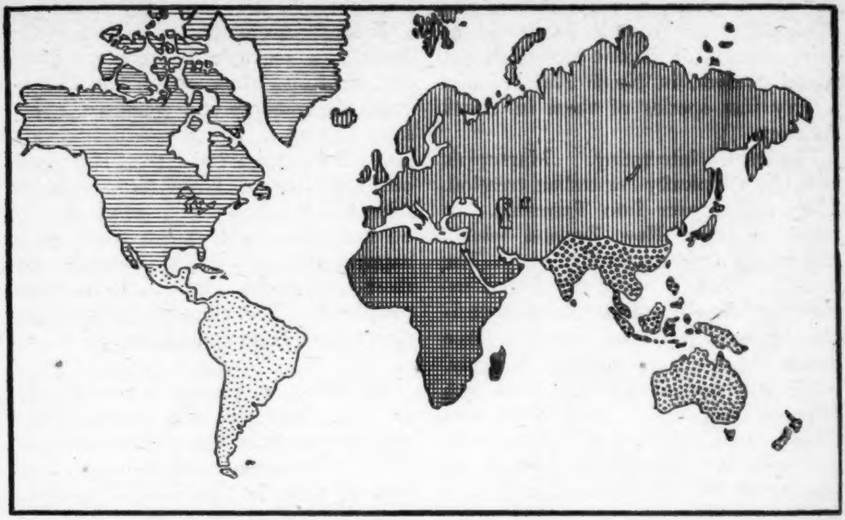
Wild cattle never existed in Australia or in South America.

I know this begins to sound like a zoological quiz—with "true" as the answer to every statement—but it is really an introduction. It is a collection of introductory remarks from the fact files of one of the most interesting of all the biological sciences: zoogeography.

Zoogeography, as indicated by the name, is the science of the geographical distribution of animals. It is not interested in finding out the differences between groups of animals. It leaves that to anatomy and zoology. But it is grateful for the results. Zoologists establish, for example, that there is a profound difference between the marsupials and the other, higher, mammals. Zoologists will state under the heading of *Marsupials* (quotation from Dr. Leister's "Present Day Mammals," published by the New York Zoological Society):

> In all of the members of this group the placenta is usually lacking or rudimentary. The young are born in a practically larval condition but undergo further development in the pouch, or "marsupium," of the mother.

The zoogeographer, as stated before, will not bother to find that out for himself. But he is interested in this statement just the same. What really interests him, however, is where these marsupials live. He gets the answer to that question from zoologists and travelers and when he has all these data together he begins to stick pins in maps. Having finished with that he looks at the map and notes the results. They are, in the case of the marsupials: plenty of them in Australia, but none in nearby New Zealand, although they occur in



MAP OF THE WORLD WITH ZOO-GEOGRAPHICAL REGIONS

NORTH AMERICAN REGION

(Horizontal shading)

includes Greenland, but not Iceland, nor Cuba and Central America.

SOUTH AMERICAN REGION

(Dotted, solid dots)

includes Central America and Cuba.

EURASIA

(Vertical shading)

the modern Eurasian fauna did not succeed in going south of the Himalaya range, but spilled over into northern Africa and the northern parts of Arabia.

AFRICA (Old Europe Fauna)

(Checkered)

save for a few survivors of the real African fauna the Africa of today represents "Old Europe." But "Old Africa" can still be found next door, in the small but independent region of

MADAGASCAR

INDIA AND INSULINDE

(Polka dots)

"Insulinde" comprises the Malayan peninsula, the large and small Sunda Islands, and in general the Sunda Sea, with the exception of New Guinea, which (at least on the ground) still represents the oldest existing region.

AUSTRALIA

(x-ed)

comprised the continent of Australia, New Guinea, Tasmania and New Zealand. Some small islands near New Zealand represent a still older fauna, characterized mainly by Hatteria (or Sphenodon).

Tasmania. Asia, Europe, Africa and Madagascar are completely devoid of them—but there is one masupial, old friend possum, in North America and a very few species of them in South America.

Hm-m-m, interesting. Marsupials look like a typically Australian creation. They spilled over into Tasmania, but failed to reach New Zealand which, after all, is a thousand miles away. The problem becomes complicated—and interesting—because of the North American opossum and the two or three South American masupials. Nobody, being informed about these facts, can help but ask why. And these two things, the distribution of types of animals over the earth and the reason or reasons for this distribution, are the real field of the zoogeographer. It is by no means a restricted field; a zoogeographer has to be an all-around natural historian. He has to know the results of zoology and geography, of climatology and topography, of geology and paleontology, of paleogeography and paleoclimatology. He has to be well versed in evolutionary history and he must know the zoological results of the history of exploration more or less by heart.

He must not puzzle about the fact that there are honey bees in America as well as in Europe—he has to know that they were introduced by the early settlers, as were a host of domesticated animals and a lot of others which they brought in against their will, for example the white cabbage butterfly. His job, as most jobs in scientific research, begins with collecting data, an enormous mass of carefully verified data. When they have grown to mountainous proportions he can begin to sift and assort them. This kind of work, although not called zoogeography from the outset, has been going on for more than a century by now. And it resulted in the realization that there are definite "regions" of the distribution of animals and that these regions are not caused by the climate. Climatic influences exist, but they are of secondary nature.

Take the well-known "African landscape" for example. There are lions and elephants, rhinoceroses and hippopotamuses, zebras and antelopes, monkeys and apes. But the African landscape lacks tapirs and tigers; if it were only a question of climate they should be there too, but they aren't. South Africa, on the other hand, which could be a happy feeding or hunting ground for almost any African animal, lacks them completely. The climate, the present-day climate, is no explanation.

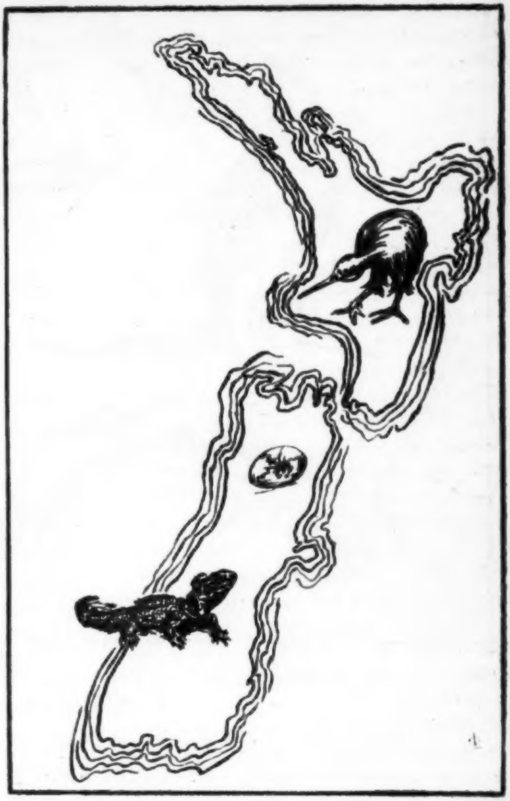
But before we go on it is necessary to get acquainted with the zoogeographic regions that have been found to exist. There are seven such regions. The first of them is the North American region, or, as it is called in scientific circles, the Neoarctic region. The term simply means the "New (World) Northern region," it has nothing to do with the word "arctic" in its ordinary sense, even though that region comprises the Far North and Greenland. Iceland, incidentally, while situated in the Western Hemisphere geographically—by degrees of longitude—does not belong to the Neoarctic region. Nor do Central America, Cuba and the West Indies. They form, together with the South American continent, the Neotropic region. The African continent forms the so-called Ethiopian region, all of it, except for the parts north of the Sahara Desert and the section along the lower Nile. In these parts the African fauna is not "African," but has the characteristics of the Paleoarctic—meaning "Old (World) Northern"—region which also includes all of Europe, Iceland, Spitsbergen and all of Asia except India. Madagascar is a region by itself, and so is Australia and Tasmania, usually lumped together with New Zealand. India, finally, and Insulinde, which means the Malay peninsula and the islands in the Sunda Sea, form the so-called Oriental region.

Just reading over this list, a number of strange things can be noted. Why,

NEW ZEALAND

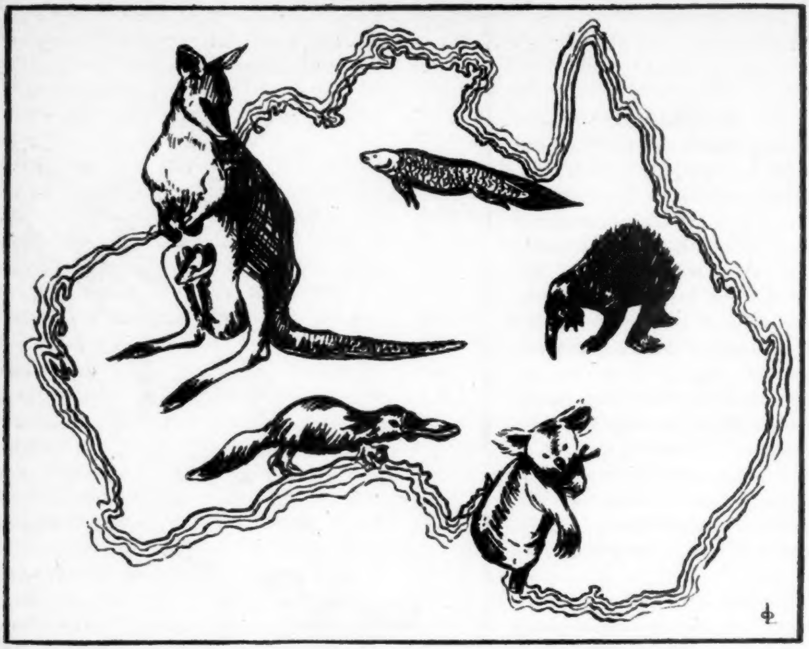
New Zealand and Australia are classified as one and the same zoo-geographical region, but actually New Zealand has a fauna of its own, somewhat older than that of Australia. The main representatives are the kiwi, or kiwi-kiwi, a flightless bird of about the stature of a domestic hen and the lizardlike reptile *Hatteria* or *Sphenodon* which represents one of the oldest types of reptiles known to science. It is only about two feet long when fully grown. Once on the verge of extinction, strictly enforced laws have saved *Hatteria.*

Extinct relatives of the kiwis were the gigantic moas, the last of which were hunted down by New Zealanders only about a generation before Captain Cook landed there.



for example, is Africa split up into two regions, the same in Asia? In the latter case one may guess that the mountains of the Himalaya range have something to do with it—but the Ural Mountains are pretty high, too, and Europe and Asia still form only one region. Why does India and the islands of Insulinde belong to one region, while Australia belongs to another one? The stretches of open water between some of the Insulinde islands and Australia are not considerably wider than those separating the Insulinde islands from each other. And Madagascar is certainly close to Africa, but the animals of both are as different as they can possibly be.

That problem alone was difficult enough, but it was made even worse by dissenting elements in each one of the seven main regions. The American opossum is one of those dissenting elements; it should live in Australia, not in America. A strange and rare African mammal, called *Potamogale*—the name means, in translation, "river weasel," but it should be "giant fish-eating water shrew"—is another one of them. It does not fit into the African fauna, nor in any other of our planet and our time, for that matter. The same goes for the Australian duckbill platypus and its relative, the spiny anteater or echidna, one variety of which lives in Australia and the other in New Guinea. They do not fit into any region on our planet—and it is not just a silly mistake of a forgotten generation of musty armchair scientists that British zoologists of the year 1800, having only a skin of platypus, wondered whether it might not be a work of art like the so-



AUSTRALIA

Not quite as old as New Zealand, but old enough to be any zoologist's delight. The picture shows (top center) the lungfish *Neoceratodus Forsteri,* the duckbill platypus (bottom center) and (right) the spiny anteater or echidna, platypus' closest and only living relative. The koala and the giant kangaroo represent the dominant marsupial fauna of Australia; the giant kangaroo is the largest living marsupial, but it was surpassed by far in size and weight by gigantic hippopotamus- and rhinoceroslike marsupials which lived in the interior of Australia only some ten thousand years ago.

called "Eastern mermaids" which consist of the upper part of a small monkey sewn to the tail end of a large fish.

Freak distributions like those of tapir and horseshoe crab and all-around misfits like platypus were the bane of zoogeography until about 1860. Even those who did not literally believe the story of Noah's Ark had trouble explaining the comparative "emptiness" of South America. And every time somebody looked at one of the "misfits"—their ranks had been swelled by two fish with lungs, one in South America and the other in the Nile—he had the uncomfortable feeling that there was something radically wrong, some important factor missing, some great idea unthought of.

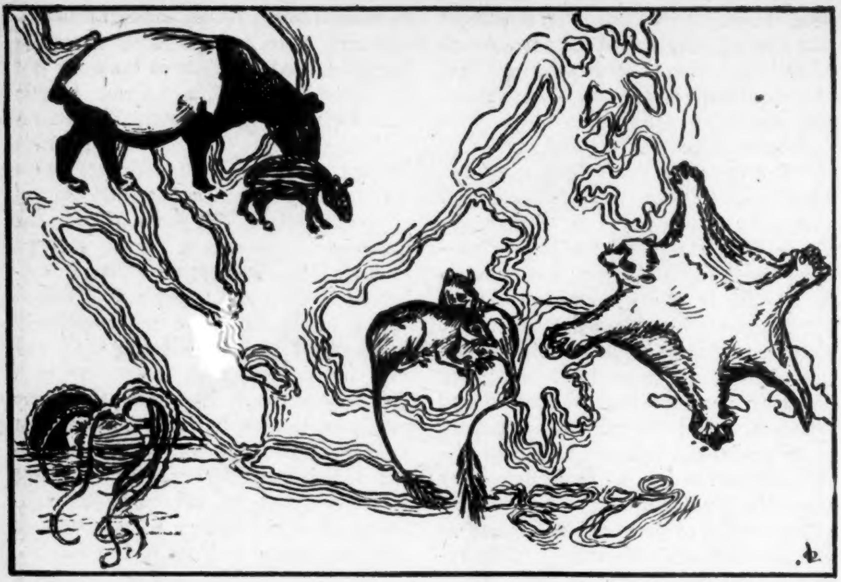
Then came turmoil. Charles Darwin caused a thunderstorm which raged for thirty years. But it cleared the air as good thunderstorms do. The mustiness that had separated all species from each other was swept away during that period, dozens of ridiculous hypotheses and useless theories were blown into nothingness—and in the clear air that followed the storm, everybody could see what should have been obvious all along: that the present is of necessity the result of the past. Suddenly everything began to make sense; it did not do so at once in all its confusing details, but it began to be understandable. Freak distributions were freakish only in relation to the world map of our time; they had been normal when the map looked different. And the misfits turned out to be misfits not in space but in time—the opossum was in its perfectly proper region in North America, but it was the proper region of the very late Cretaceous and the very early Tertiary, not the region of today. Which, in turn, led to the conclusion that the whole Australian region was not so much a different zoogeographic region, but a left-over piece of an older fauna, a piece of the geologic past, preserved through and therefore misplaced in time.

When all these things were realized and understood—it took a number of decades to understand them—zoogeography advanced from the stage of a purely descriptive science, the main duty of which was the preparation of endless lists of animals belonging to this or that region, to the status of a science that could *explain*. A science that could not only tell how things are but that could also tell *why* they are the way they are now. Zoogeography now had a story to tell and that story did not begin with Columbus' trip to the West Indies or Marco Polo's journey to the country of the Great Khan. Instead, it began some four hundred million years ago, some time during the Carboniferous Period.

Then, as now, the surface of the earth consisted of oceans and of continents, with about three times as much water as land. But the map did not look the way it does today. North America had a southern shore, approximately along the Mexican border. Central America did not exist. Instead, a narrow tongue jutted eastward in the north, connecting the North American continent with Europe. Europe itself had an eastern shore along a line connecting Odessa with Leningrad. To make up for the flooding of its eastern sector, Europe extended to the north so that it embraced Iceland and Greenland. Siberia was a huge island, but not completely independent since the Bering Sea was dry and it was thus connected with North America. In short, the three northern continents formed an almost uninterrupted hoop around the Northern Hemisphere. There was only one break in that hoop, caused by the submergence of the eastern parts of Russia and the western sections of Siberia.

The Southern Hemisphere could boast only one continent, but it was an enormous one, Gondwanaland, stretching from New Zealand almost to the Pacific coast of South America, but *not across the Pacific*. Instead, it reached from South America eastward across the southern Atlantic, comprised all of Africa, Madagascar, the Indian Ocean, India south of the Himalayas, all of Malaya and Insulinde, all of Australia and New Guinea, all of the sea between Australia and New Zealand and some four fifths of New Zealand itself.

I have devoted some space to the description of this ancient map because it is an important one. The map looked like that for some four hundred million years when the coal forests of the Carboniferous Period shrouded the earth and it continued to look like that for another two hundred fifty million years afterwards. There were minor changes, of course, but in general that picture held true all the time, especially Gondwanaland. In the north the two continents of North America and of Asia sometimes connected, sometimes they separated; Europe was alternately attached to the one or the other and once North America even briefly con-



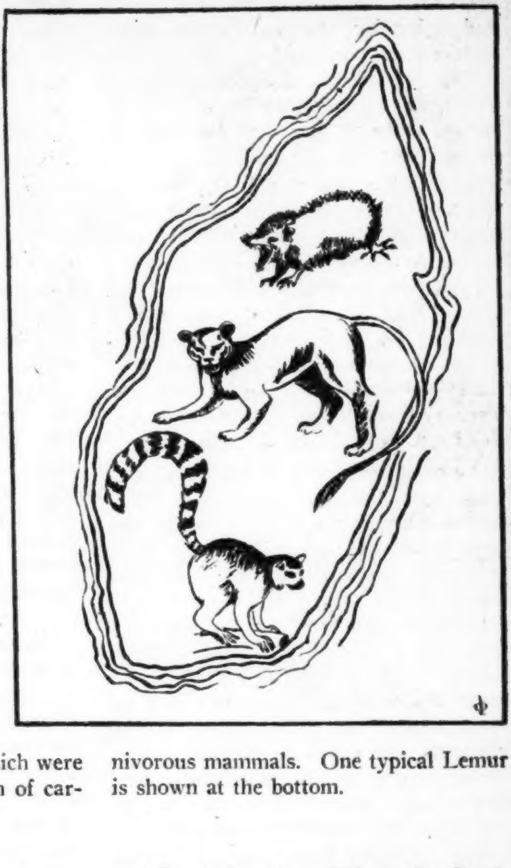
INSULINDE

The name of Insulinde was given by scientists to the region comprising the Malayan peninsula and the many islands of the Sunda Sea. Insulinde has the most colorful and intriguing fauna of all the zoo-geographical regions.

It is usually grouped together with India, because the Indian or Oriental fauna has made such deep inroads that the two cannot be kept apart. But an older "layer" of specifically "Insulindian" animals is clearly visible. The drawing shows some of them, the tapir, which you may call a primitive horse, a large pig or a small rhinoceros without stretching things very much in any direction. The flying horror at the right is the flying lemur, or *Galeopithecus,* last representative of a line of evolution which came to nothing, while the two ratlike animals in the center are a pair of *Ptilocercus,* recently recognized as primates, which means that they belong to the same group of mammals as monkeys, apes and Man.

Some of the cuttlefish of the Sunda Sea still form shells, as did the cephalopods of the age of the great saurians. One of them, *(Argonauta)* is shown.

nected with Gondwanaland in the south. But, generally speaking, there were three continents on the map, two in the north and one in the south. It was not until comparatively recent times, about the middle of the Jurassic Period, that Gondwanaland broke to pieces and that the shards then began to form the con-



MADAGASCAR

The fauna of Madagascar is unique in that it consists mainly of lemurs or "half monkeys," as German zoologists call them. Madagascar is a zoo-geographical region all by itself, in spite of its comparatively small size. What it really represents is "Old Africa," the fauna of Africa as it was before the European invasion at the beginning of the glacial period changed it into what it is today. Madagascar, being separated, remained untouched by this invasion.

The picture shows the Tanrek, or Tenrek (top), a relative of the European hedgehog. It has the distinction of having the biggest mouth of all mammals (relative to its size). The fossa or Kryptoprokta (center) is a representative of catlike predators which were not yet true cats, an older form of carnivorous mammals. One typical Lemur is shown at the bottom.

nections that make the map of today.

Gondwanaland broke into pieces from east to west, slowly, gradually without shaking the world. The Gonwana "Empire" did not collapse; it decayed, slowly, over a time interval of some one hundred million years. New Zealand became independent first at the eastern end, and New Guinea separated like a splinter in the north of the eastern end. After that, a huge shard—fully as large as the United States—separated: Australia. The Indian Ocean appeared. Malaya and India itself, for a time probably just a group of large islands, finally made contact northward, attaching themselves to the Siberian continent. When that happened, Madagascar, Africa, the southern Atlantic and South America still formed a Gondwanaland of their own, with no connections northward.

That gradual change alone explains most of the puzzling facts of the geographical distribution of animals—but before going into detail I cannot help but remind myself of an amusing biological parallel. Evolutionists occasionally use a strange term when speaking about the coloring of mammals. They talk about "archaic stripes." The term refers to a scheme of coloration where the stripes run from head to tail, horizontal, not vertical like those of tiger and zebra. The young of mammals that are fairly uniformly colored when adult often show these archaic stripes; it is believed that most of the early mammals had such a fur. Later the stripes either widened or narrowed, leaving a uniformly colored fur, of lighter or darker shade, as the case may be, or else the stripes broke up into dots and then reformed vertically.

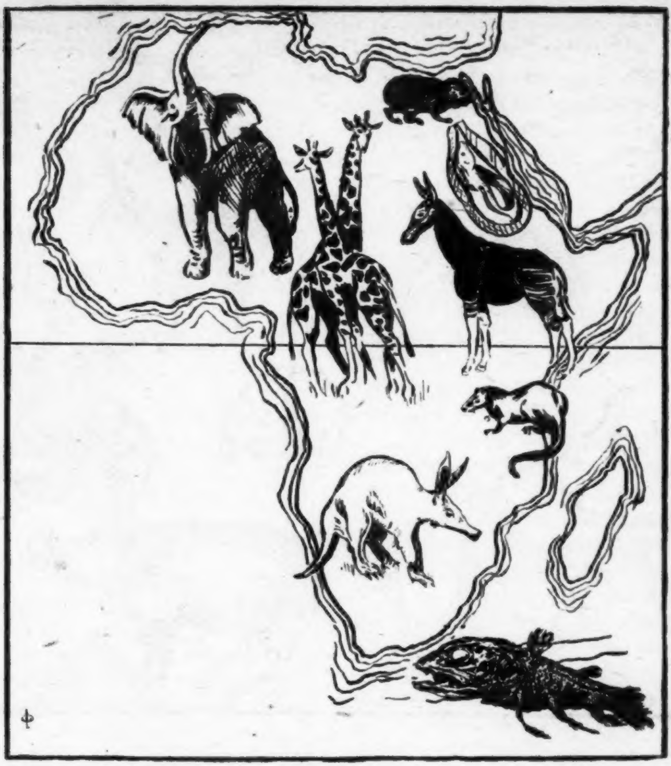
The map of the world went through precisely the same change. The continents originally ran east to west with no known exception. Then, during the Jurassic Period, they began to break up. During the following Cretaceous, all was muddle and confusion; the continent-stripes became island-dots until they finally—roughly speaking, during the Tertiary Period—got into the now predominant north-south arrangement.

To understand and to realize all this took some time. It would have taken considerably longer if living things had been wiped out in the process, Cuvier believed. Even then it could have been found; rocks cannot and do not hide their origin and their age, but since life was not wiped out by these changes there is a lot of living debris along the trails, those "misfits" that were once so mysterious. They turned out to be fine signposts with elaborate explanations on them; all that science had to learn was how to read them. Then they told of connections as well as of separations.

For example: New Zealand, one of the first pieces to break away from old Gondwanaland, boasts two famous "living fossils." One is a small, flightless nocturnal bird, the kiwi, or kiwi-kiwi, the other is a reptile which looks like a greenish and slightly maltreated lizard, between one and two feet in length. The latter, called *Hatteria,* or *Sphenodon*—with the native name Tuatera, or Tuatara, thrown in for good measure—represents one of the oldest groups of reptiles. Its tribe is, in fact, granddaddy to some of the dinosaurs that appeared later. The high age of Hatteria indicates a high age for New Zealand with no very drastic climatic changes since Hatteria was up-to-date. The relative emptiness of New Zealand indicates that it was isolated for a long time; no new arrivals came, save for the Maori a few hundred years ago. And those Maori saw the last of the gigantic moas, flightless birds of the ostrich type and related—in some devious way—to the still surviving little kiwi. It is now generally accepted as a fact that flightless birds of such types were a typical Gondwana creation. Consequently, they appear only on former Gondwana soil; there was no north-south connection for a sufficient length of time to permit mass migration to the north.

New Zealand had the moas and still has the kiwi. Australia has the emu, New Guinea has the cassowary, Madagascar had *Aepyornis,* largest of them all, Africa has the ostrich and South America has the rhea or nandu. The latter two, nandu and ostrich, were in contact long enough to share the acquisition of a special kind of feather-lice, distinct from those of any other bird.

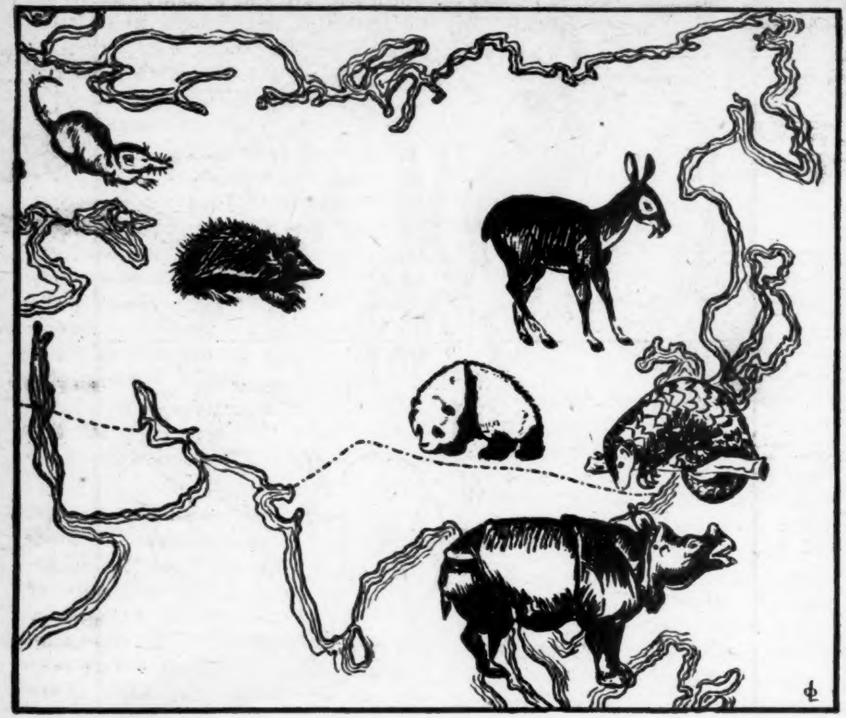
The earliest mammals—marsupials, to be precise—appeared on earth at about the same time as the dinosaurs. Both overran the whole globe, but they could not reach New Zealand any more. There were Gondwana dinosaurs, but it seems that they did not reach Australia any more. But the marsupials did and during the long time of their isolation they evolved everything that the higher—placental—mammals did elsewhere. They produced masupial wolves—Tasmania's pride—marsupial cats, marsupial rats, mice, squirrels, flying squirrels and anything you can think of. The kangaroos are the show pieces, because of strangeness of appearance and of size—but only some ten thousand years ago the central deserts of Australia, then not quite as dry as nowadays, still harbored marsupial equivalents of rhinoceroses and hippopotamuses. But there are still older things around in Australia; representatives of the fish that became amphibians, called lungfishes. The Australian variety which happens to be the most impressive one is called *Ceratodus* because of its large



AFRICA

Africa does not boast the weirdest fauna, but it easily has the the weirdest mixture of faunas of all continents. The conspicuous types, elephants, giraffes and okapis, the zebras (not shown) and in general all the animals that are shown in "African landscapes" in museums and zoological parks are really all late immigrants; they are the animals of "Old Europe." But there are also some old Africans left. The animal that sticks its nose into the Red Sea is really the ancestor of the elephants (or a member of the group of which the ancestors of present-day elephants were a part). It is the Hyrax or Coney which got into the Bible as "rabbit." Underneath the okapi we have *Potamogale*. The name means "river weasel"; actually it is the largest kind of shrew alive (but it has changed over to a fish diet), with only one much smaller relative *(Geogale)* on Madagascar. The Aard-vark . . . well, there is nothing like it on earth, barring other aard-varks, but it is old.

Of strange fish Africa boasts the Nile lungfish *Protopterus*, which sleeps through the summer—"estivation" is the technical term for summer sleep—in a dried-up mud capsule. And off the shores of south Africa there lives *Latimeria*, so far known only in one specimen, a fish that was thought to have been extinct long before the saurians appeared on earth.



EURASIA

The Eurasian fauna is rather comprehensive, as can be expected of a territory which is three times as wide (measured in an east-westerly direction) as the United States.

Shrew and hedgehog (at left, in Europe and European Russia, respectively) are survivors of the early insectivores, ancestors of all other mammals, except monotremes and marsupials. The strange fanged antelope is a male musk deer *(Moschus moschiferus)* the closest thing to the ancestors of the stags and of antelopes in general still in existence. The Chinese pangolin is another one of those old insectivores that developed an external armor—that of the pangolin is good enough to permit it to attack even the driver ant. Western China is distinct as the country of the Snowy Mountains, which is a tropical jungle elevated to several thousand feet and accompanying ice and snow, with most of the jungle surviving! Its featured animal is the giant panda, whose ancestors were raccoonlike immigrants from North America.

The rhinoceros belongs to about the same time as the musk deer and the giant panda, but it lives south of the dividing line, being a representative of the Indian or Oriental region.

teeth. But there are two more lungfishes alive, both famous because of their habit of estivation—summer sleep—in dried up mud cakes: *Protopterus* in the upper Nile and *Lepidosiren* in the Amazon River. Gondwana soil again! And Australia finally preserved the oldest types of mammals, the so-called monotremes. Australia has the duckbill platypus and the spiny anteater echidna; New Guinea has only another variety of echidna. The world is old down there.

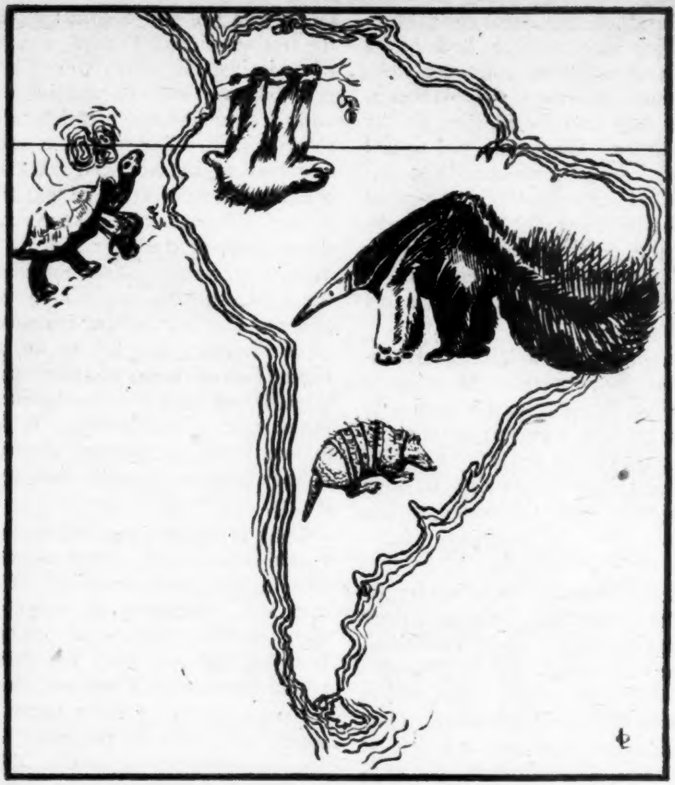
The marsupials of the Western Hemisphere signify only that the tribe is hardy and manages to survive even with much higher forms around as enemies and competitors. Bones of the earlier form of our opossum have actually been found together with the bones of late dinosaurs.

Outside of Australia, evolution forged ahead, the placentals hit upon their earliest useful design: the insectivores. After the marsupials the insectivores overran the world; they seem to be mainly an Old World creation. Some nicely primitive types are still left at and near their place of origin: the various shrews of Europe and Asia and the hedgehog. The moles belong to that tribe, too; living mainly underground they have managed to retain a larger territory than the other forms. But the insectivores did not remain insectivores for long: they began to branch out with rapidity and vigor, the whole Tertiary Period is a period of mass creation of new forms of higher mammals. When the mammals were represented only by marsupials and, possibly, the earliest insectivores, the dinosaurs had ruled the earth. But then they had been killed off wholesale by a thinning out of the swamp-jungle and bright sunshine and all the Lebensraum fell to the mammals: they certainly made the best of it.

Steering in the direction of the monkeys and apes to come, the insectivores developed small ratlike tree climbers of which two are still around: *Ptilocerus*, the feathertail, and Tupaya, which latter name is just the Malay word for squirrel. The air was comparatively empty and the mammals made various attempts to conquer it. The most successful one was that which sacrificed the arms for the purpose of creating wings: the bats are an old tribe. Less successful was the method of the later rodents to develop a fur wing between the four legs; the flying squirrels are not flyers, only gliders. But one ancient attempt in the same direction has led to an almost-flight: *Galeopithecus* of Insulinde. It is large, larger even than the batlike flying foxes, and it is strange. It has no known living or extinct relatives and nobody even knows with certainty what it eats.

Look at the drawings and see how the puzzle begins to fit. They all live down there in that "ancient corner" of Southeast Asia, surviving as neighbors of such modern animals as orangutans. But they did not reach the Australian region any more. There are some very old ones shown on those maps. They appear only once on the maps for reasons of purely artistic nature. They are shown approximately at the spot where they are most numerous now, but they exist also elsewhere, usually in widely separated spots, last outposts of former global domination. Our horseshoe crab, *Limulus polyphemus americanus*, is one of them. It lives along the Atlantic coast of North America, but there is also a closely related variety in the waters around the Moluccas. The giant turtles of the Galápagos Island are another example; similar types could be found, and were found, by the early explorers on several groups of islands in the Indian Ocean.

Then there is the tribe of armored old insectivores. Some of them survived in South America, others in Asia. Not so much evidence of a former connection as evidence of a former world-wide distribution of those animals. The lemurs or "half monkeys"—as the German

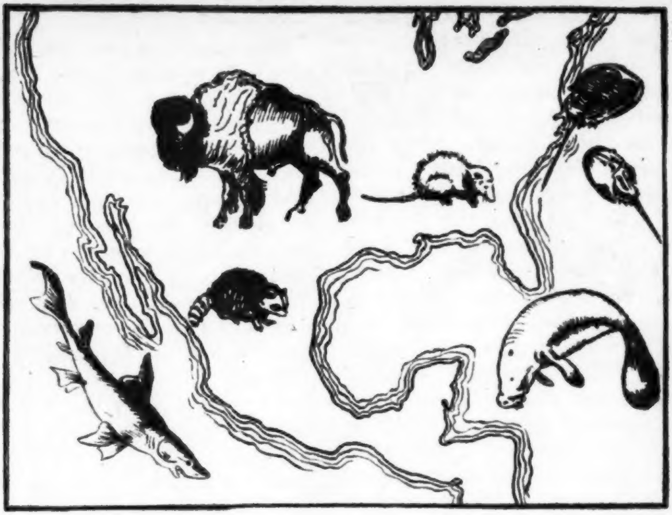


SOUTH AMERICA

Only a few representatives of the very typical and interesting original fauna of South America are still surviving.. Though differing greatly in size, shape and habits of life, they all belong fairly closely together. The sloth (top) has adapted itself completely to a life above the ground in the trees; it is exclusively leaf-eating, but not finicky about the kind of leaves it swallows; the endless jungle of the Amazon River is one huge ocean of food for the sloth, in which it travels about, hanging upside down, with no reason for hurry.

The giant anteater (center) has specialized itself for an exclusive diet of ants and termites. The heavily armored armadillo (bottom) is also insect-eating, but not quite as exclusively so as the giant anteater.

The Galápagos Islands off South America should also be counted as a separate region, being virtually still in the Age of the Reptiles. The elephant tortoise of the Galápagos Islands (shown) conveys that idea by its very appearance . . . and in this case looks are not deceptive. (They weigh several hundred pounds, but do well with eight grams, or a little over one quarter ounce, of brain.)



NORTH AMERICA

Typical representative of the modern North American mammals, not counting the artificial Eurasian invasion caused by Man, is the bison. But there are some genuine oldsters around. The opossum, a marsupial, should really be Australian, while the most American of all American mammals, the raccoon, belongs to a later stratum. However, it can claim the honor of being close to the ancestor of the giant panda as well as the lesser panda.

Offshore we find the famous horseshoe crab, much older than any hill on earth and a representative of the sharks, which are also much older than any existing hill, mountain or even continent, although of a more recent date than the horseshoe crab. The Florida manatee represents an old group of mammals; its relatives live near Australia (of course!) while another relative, Steller's Sea Cow, lived in the Bering Sea, where it was exterminated early in the nineteenth century.

technical term reads in translation—also seem to be a Gondwana creation which either did not get to South America or became extinct again later on. Insulinde has some at present and even the Asiatic continent itself, but their "country" in our time is Madagascar. In more than fifty varieties they jump and swing through the trees there, rapidly whisk across clearings on the ground and generally dominate the scene.

As far as I know there are none in Africa, but some African and Madagascan mammals point to a hidden connection. Africa boasts the largest still living insectivore—which, however, actually is a fish-eater now—the strange Potamogale. Potamogale has *one*, precisely one, living relative: Geogale of Madagascar. Africa also has the strange aardvarks—Dutch for "earth pigs" because they yield hams—which, significantly, survive in three widely separated spots of the dark continent. Africa also has a small, foot-long furry animal which goes under the name of coney or hyrax. They got into the Bible as "rabbits" because no European Bible translator had ever seen one or heard of them, but the context pointed to something small and furry. They even have teeth resembling those of rabbits and other rodents, but their stomachs resemble the stomachs of horses. French zoologists termed them *"une sorte de rhinocéros en miniature"* and German zoologists finally labeled them "ancestors of the elephants." These coneys as well as the ancient aardvarks would fit in much better with the "half-cat" fossa of Madagascar and the hedgehoglike Tenrek of the same island.

Actually, the aardvarks and coneys live next door to long-neck giraffes and short-neck giraffes—okapis—which during the late Tertiary were characteristic for Europe and the westernmost sections of Asia; they live together with elephants and rhinoceroses, otherwise Asiatic with some spilling over into Insulinde; they live together with horses—zebras—which are now typically Asiatic, also the tribe originated in North America where it became extinct and had to be reintroduced—the whole thing is awfully confusing. But it is so simple.

Those elephants, giraffes, zebras, et cetera, et cetera, are the faunas of Europe and Asia of the late Tertiary. When the Ice Age came they were forced south in a continuous stream and conquered Africa. Thus Africa of today is simply "Old Europe." And "Old Africa"? Well, some of it managed to survive, coneys and potamogales, aardvarks and some moles. But before the invasion came, a part of Old Africa had split off, consequently it is still unmolested. It is Madagascar.

And now America.

It seems that it was America's fate to give birth to large groups of impressive or, at any event, interesting tribes of mammals, only to lose them later by a combination of emigration and extinction. The horses are an American creation: Columbus did not find any when he reached the Western Hemisphere. Nor did Leif Ericson five hundred years before him. The camels are an American creation—but even their reintroduction during the last century found a sad end. It has also been claimed that the elephants were an American creation, but it is more likely that they were immigrants themselves. Most of the amazing huge mammals of the White River fauna—and other faunas, all Tertiary—died out again. And even the American bison had to share the honors of being an especially old member of the cattle tribe with the European Wisent which, because it was European, became known earlier.

But there are at least a few things we can boast about: our old friend opossum, authenticated as an American since the time of the dinosaurs, the horseshoe crab, save for a few clams the oldest living animal, the sharks in coastal waters which are older even than the African wonder fish *Latimeria* and, last but by no means least, the raccoon.

The raccoons originated in North America. When the way to South America was opened they spread southward, but not much. They did not need to; they had already spread over most of the world in other directions. Northward and across what is now the Bering Sea, they had traveled all across Asia to Western Europe. They died out there again, but they established a permanent foothold in China. But the one that got there was not our present-day raccoon; it was his ancestor *Plaocyon*. While those that had stayed in America changed fairly much into our raccoon of today, the ones that got to China changed much less. When they were discovered they were described as a kind of fox, but lived on trees as strict vegetarians. *Ailurus* became their scientific name. But long before they were discovered they had given birth to an offshoot which quickly grew to bearlike appearance and proportions. To describe this other is not necessary any more since it has gained great popularity. It is the giant panda, and *Ailurus* is now generally known as the lesser panda.

There is one continent left: South America. And South America is strange. It is virtually devoid of significant animals and that emptiness is difficult to explain. Having been part of Gondwanaland it should be expected to present a fauna like "Old Africa." But there is only the lungfish *Lepidosiren* and the nandu with its featherlice to confirm this point, although the fact cannot be doubted. Even the tapir is said to be a recent immigrant from the North.

Of the old South African fauna, hardly anything but armadillos, giant anteaters and tree sloths are left. But when these animals were "modern," South America teemed with strange creations, among them a marsupial saber tooth. All these died out, probably before the way to the north was opened. In between the glytodons and giant sloths evolved, large counterparts to the still surviving tree sloths and armadillos. And then those died out again, although so late that one would speak of "within historic times" if the South Atlantic were the Mediterranean. Those South American animals that are best known—the llama, the peccari and the jaguar—are all North Americans; they poured southward when the Ice Age began to chill the Northern continent. In short: South America is still puzzling. The South American fauna is a patchwork quilt—and it should be much larger. But its few living signposts clearly indicate where this region belongs.

THE END.

ALL CLEAR—FOR MURDER!

It was after the blackout was lifted that the darkness of death fell. A beautiful model was the victim when murder struck a second time—and Lieutenant Tully found himself threatened with a dishonorable discharge from the force unless this sinister puzzle was solved.

It's a chilling, fascinating mystery novel, SIRENS IN THE NIGHT, by Mary Collins, complete in the April issue of

DETECTIVE STORY

AT ALL NEWSSTANDS

MARCH IS THE MONTH OF THE VICTORY BOOK CAMPAIGN—turn in good books at your nearest collection center or public library. They'll be sent to our fighting men!

Brass Tacks

If science-fiction turned out to be prophecy, the planet would be fighting off six mutually exclusive sorts of Invaders, preparing to undergo an Ice Age and/or a Nova explosion of the Sun—well, you add up all the catastrophes promised! But as stories—

Dear Mr. Campbell:

There's a thing that's been bothering me for quite a while, now, and I've finally decided to get it off my chest. It's this:

In his letter in the January, 1943, Brass Tacks, Arthur Saha says: "—too often time proves the ideas in the story silly. Witness 'Final Blackout.'" Hm-m-m. That got me thinking. Although Mr. Saha was referring specifically to war stories, the statement had meat on it. What, indeed, are we going to do when time proves some of the ideas in science-fiction stories, not silly—none really are—but rather embarrassingly incorrect?

For instance, if, when 1971 rolls around, no Slans are born (1971 was the date Van Vogt gave, if you remember), are we going to look aghast at Van Vogt's masterpiece and say: "Gad! How could that have ever been called a classic?" If Europe doesn't collapse during this war, are we to disown Robert Heinlein? Are we, now, to disclaim the greatness of "Final Blackout"?

I think not—not, that is, if science-fiction is to stand up under its own weight. It must be remembered that our authors are not prophets, but, primarily, practical dreamers with the intelligence to see and understand the benefits and the evils of the future and its manifold phases.

So far, I have spoken only of what shall come within our lifetimes. There is the question of the science-fiction of tomorrow. Are the fans of the future to select a whole new list of masterpieces with each successive period and to forget the tales of the past, of today? Again, I think not—we, and they, must reconcile ourselves to the fact that science-fiction is, in your words, Mr. Campbell, "extrapolation." It is not prophecy—and if our extrapolations go amiss in some ways, they must be looked upon as works of literature, penned by an idealistic group, and given praise for that and for the foresight of the writers who created them.

Perhaps what I've said has been all too obvious to you and to all the other writers and fans these many years—but Mr. Saha's letter shocked me a bit with what it portended, and a couple of months of mulling the thing around in my mind has calmed me down: if we do science-fiction and science-fiction writers justice, the passage of time need not dim the brilliance of our finest works.

A passing word on the March issue:

1. Richardson's "Space Fix." Probably the most important article ever published in a science-fiction magazine.
2. O'Donnell's "Clash By Night." This would have placed first had it not been for the importance of the article. Mood distinctly reminiscent of C. L. Moore. Second best so far this year, "Mimsy Were the Borogoves" being first.
3. "Shock." Padgett is excellent.
4. "Q. U. R." Not wonderful, but good reading. Ah—the author of "Rocket to the Morgue," eh?
5. "Tools." Simak is generally good, and the idea here was. But something was missing.

Haven't read Van Vogt's serial yet, but it looks good. And my reactions on your return to small size—that, I presume, is the change you mean—are mixed. I liked the old size, but the large format is *so* dignified.—Edwin M. Clinton, Jr., 2126 Grove Street, San Francisco, California.

"They fit all times—all places." Thanks—that's what I thought, too. The plots are, then, soundly based on the fundamentals of human nature, a factor that changes only over periods of hundreds of millenniums. If human beings are inherent in those futures, then the plots used are, too.

Dear Mr. Campbell:

So help me, this is my first letter to any editor, though I've often been tempted. After reading your magazine for some time, I feel qualified to observe that a fault of many of the stories you publish is the utilization of trite adventure plots which are simply transposed from the Spanish Main, the South Seas, Darkest Africa, et cetera, to a futuristic pattern and labeled science-fiction.

Lawrence O'Donnell's "Clash By Night" in the March issue is a case in point, although I do not mean to imply that it is inferior by using it as an example. The mercenary system that exists on Mr. O'Donnell's watery world might just as well have existed in the days of D'Artagnan and his pals, or in Roman or feudal times.

The chessmanlike viewpoint of our hero is perhaps more cynical than the romantic attitudes Dumas infused into his people, but the pattern is similar.

A. E. van Vogt's "Weapon Makers" serial is an excellent yarn, but stripped of its super de luxe gadgets, it goes on like a plot out of Dumas, too, except for the introduction of a new kind of superman.

The point I am getting at is that these plots could be cut into almost any era of history. They are not structures that would inhere in futuristic projections. They fit all times, all places.

To my mind, a good science-fiction plot is one that grows out of a set of conditions created by developments of the future.

In "Brave New World," Aldous Huxley perceives a social order of the future producing a self-destroying atavism. Jules Verne conceived of a trip to the moon in terms of the struggles of men braving that journey in a rocket.

A year or so ago, you published a reprint of a first-rate story of moon travel which posed a set of problems inherent to the probable conditions that would arise in such a venture.

In these tales, which are pretty well recognized as classics, it is the conditions which dictate the terms of the plot and the behavior of the characters within the limits of believable characterization.

I think this is a better approach to science-fiction writing from a literary viewpoint than picking up a boy-saves-girl plot and decorating it with futuristic window dressing.

One of the most striking departures in the science-fiction field to come to my attention is Will Stewart's seetee, but the author builds around this phenomenon a competitive situation too parallel to the contemporary to be convincing.

Rob McGee is also a new type of character and a logical one. But the imaginative power illustrated by the conception of seetee and McGee is dimmed down by a fairly usual plot.

Lester del Rey's "Nerves" was a piece of literature by reason of the author's adaptation of a plot to the particular condition of atomic power.

It seems to me to be essential that any good science-fiction story must have a plot woven in the pattern of conditions which the author imagines. The plot and the characters should be peculiar to that specific set of conditions. Otherwise we have the usual pulp standard and I have the impression that you are making an effort to escape the pulp gravitational field which is pretty strong.

In addition to plot, I find fault with characterization which tends to be stereotyped with a few notable exceptions. I think the contrast of believable people against a backdrop of incredible events makes a more effective story. I think it is Ray Cummings who produced a perfectly normal gent and then proceeded to expose him to supernormal events which made good reading until the story wound up in a free-for-all and our hero proceeded to save universes like a comic-book superman.

Science-fiction is becoming a big field in magazine literature and there is no reason why it shouldn't observe the values that make any kind of fiction worth while. Some day somebody is going to fire a rocket off the earth and somebody else is going to be in it. That will be the story of the century. Real people exploring space. It's an elementary idea to fiction writers, but the actuality is stupendous, and I suspect our hardened science-fiction fans will be as stupefied as everybody else.

And if that story is ever told, just a bare recital of facts, it will be the greatest adventure story in the history of man.

Science-fiction has possibilities. Perhaps realism makes a better yarn than just sheer fantasy.—J. V. Lewis.

I guess the best answer I can give on the next Gray Lensman story is the one the soldiers all know—"Duration plus six months."

Dear Mr. Campbell:

Here I am with a report on the March issue. My own personal opinion, naturally, but I think the majority of fans will agree with me.

1. "The Weapon Makers." Story is shaping up fine. This part is superior to the first part. At the present rate, the last installment should be something.

2. "Clash By Night." Rates exceptional. Why, oh, why, you find a good author and it seems that Mars has first call. The army grabbed off a lot of your best. Just think, after the war they can all—I hope—come back to write stories galore!

3. "Q. U. R." Something about this story that attracts me. Perhaps it is the semihumorous way in which Mr. Holmes presents it. Anyhow it's *good.*

4. "Shadow of Life." This story just didn't click with me. I think Simak could do better. And Elmer brings back pleasant memories of Archie in "Tools."

5. "Shock." I really cannot give you any reason why I put this last. Truthfully, I did not like it. Why, I don't know; perhaps it stems from the same reason I do not like fish. The other stories outshine this one by far.

Article: I did not read it as yet, but when I do I will probably find it interesting.

So, not only does Mars grab our best authors, but also grabs the very paper you print the mag on. Yes, I just learned to my great sorrow, via the *Fantasy Fiction Field,* that both Astounding and *Unknown Worlds* are going back to small size. I would much rather see Astounding back to small size than have to wait two months between issues, though. Returning to regular size has its compensations, the best one being an increase of Brass Tacks, *I hope.*

Incidentally, how soon are you going

to run the Smith yarn? I'm dying to know what's cooking with our Gray Lensman and his Patrol side-kicks. I do not want any definite month, but I would like an idea. Will it be this year, early next year, or when?—Richard Olsson, 562 West 148th Street, New York, New York.

Don A. Stuart is too darned busy to write for the magazine now. Sorry.

Dear Mr. Campbell:

Report on February ASF:

1. "Opposites—React," Part 2. Better than "Minus Sign"—barely. A+.
2. "Mimsy Were the Borogoves." Could have been written in half as many words. A—.
3. "The Weapon Makers." Better than I expected after "Weapon Shops." B+.
4. "God's Footstool."
5. "Flight into Darkness." War histeria. C.
6. "The Man in the Moon." Puerile. C.

Probability Zero:

1. "Efficiency."
2. "Blue Ice."
3. "The Anecdote of the Movable Ears."

None of those were good.

Ten best of 1942:

1. "Beyond This Horizon." MacDonald gives a fairly detailed picture of a future civilization without copying directly from the past, without concentrating excessively on any one phase of life, and without sacrificing characters to description and explanation.
2. "Goldfish Bowl." It could be!
3. "Asylum." Tremendous.
4. "Minus Sign." This would rate a couple of notches higher except for the several inconsistencies.
5. "Impediment." Originality plus.
6. "Collision Orbit." Stewart again. I wonder what he'll turn to when he exhausts the subject of seetee.
7. "Waldo." A very unusual story, and hard to rate fairly. Waldo as a character was entirely credible, as was everything else except the voodoo stunts, which failed to ring any bell with me.
8. "Proof." Again Hal Clement, and again a highly original idea.
9. "My Name Is Legion."
10. "Wings of Night," tied with "Not Only Dead Men."

Best stories not in the above list: "Anachron, Inc.," "Nerves," "Tools," "Co-operate or Else," and Padgett's little nightmares.

The average excellence of all the stories of 1942 was not as high as in 1941; but by the increase in quantity the number of good stories increased. Raising the average length was a good idea, too.

Prospects for 1943: very poor. Calling Don A. Stuart!—Chandler Davis, Weld 11, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Frequently, specific names get carried over as general nouns. "Pistol" was originally a specific noun—now become a class noun. Similarly, "rifle" might become a general noun meaning a long-shafted, somewhat clumsy hand-weapon.

Dear Sir:

I'd like to give vent to some purely personal prejudices—subject, portable weapons of the future, as depicted in ASF. First complaint—in "Beyond This Horizon," MacDonald's choice of the .45 ACP as the hand-gun to resurrect and employ against ray-guns. The automatic pistol is never used for rapid-draw work since the grip is hard to get hold of in a hurry and the draw has to have three components: removal from holster, either cocking gun by pulling slide back, or removing safety, and then firing. If I had to make a choice of a twentieth-century hand-gun to tote into the future, I'd probably choose a .357 Magnum revolver, with wad-cutter bullets and a 2 or 6-inch barrel, depending on whether I wanted speed of draw or accuracy at a distance—probably compromise on one of each. Certainly the 2-inch-barreled belly-gun in the right sort of a holster could be gotten into action quicker than any long-barreled ray-gun. Accordingly, I can't help but wish that MacDonald had chosen some such gun to resurrect.

I feel much more strongly about Van Vogt's "Weapon Shop" series. Apparently even V. V. doesn't visualize their stock of weapons clearly. There is, for instance, the question of why an energy-weapon should be a revolver, which is a favorite term of V. V.'s for an atomic hand-gun. Surely, when dealing with atomic forces an obsolete and inaccurate mechanical method of replacing spent charges is inelegant. The use of the term "rifle" would also seem difficult to justify, since it implies a rifled barrel, which would seem unnecessary for the discharge and control of atomic energies.

I entirely agree with your recent editorial about the peculiar virtues of the chemically propelled projectile. My predictions about the rifle of the future—borrowed somewhat from Phil Sharpe's book—would run: caliber .22-.25, muzzle velocity 9,000-12,000 foot-seconds, with exceedingly flat trajectory, sights binocular optical for day use, projection of spot of light with cross-hairs for night use, stock, probably "Bull-Pup," with bolt and chamber at rear of stock.

Was highly pleased to note that Stewart used inverse-square law as solution of bed-plate problem, since I'd suggested it, though definitely not in that form, in my last letter.—Harold Wooster, 2005 Monroe Street, Madison, Wisconsin.

Said the queen, "Don't be stupider than you have to. That isn't an automatic bomb; it's under the control of an operator watching the television screen—"

Dear Mr. Campbell:

Of all the amateurish simpletons—That Neelan in Van Vogt's "The Weapon Makers." He sits there under the Lambeth and let's that hyper-dramatic wench threaten to torture him and doesn't even snap a finger! Howdoyoulikethat! The guy sits there with an ace of spades up his sleeve and doesn't even try dealing off the bottom. Look, he shoots out his hand, grabbing her wrist. "But, your majesty," he says coolly, "I fear for your very life! Won't you reconsider?"

"Reconsider!" Her voice is a deadly hiss.

"Have you forgotten, my dear queen," he speaks softly now, "that by your own decision I have been converted into a human *bomb?* Now, don't struggle. If I should say the wrong thing, now, it wouldn't be pleasant for either of us, would it? Careful, Zeydel! Your henchmen took my gun. You have it? Fine. May I have it back?"

Heheheheheh. Aren't we *devils?*

Will Stewart loses quality in this last part of his "Opposites—React!" I still hold that since spacemen—asterites, frontiersmen, whateveryawanttocall'em—will definitely have to handle science skillfully enough to keep alive in the Void, they definitely won't accept military space soldiers who haven't the background of an engineer coupled with the stamina of a Ranger—Commando, if you will. That goes with women, too.

So Van Vogt is writing in series, too, now. That reference to a seesaw stuck out like a sore thumb. Say, what if an author was to write one yarn under one pseudonym, another yarn under another, and so on, for the same magazine, and have 'em in series—forget it, huh!

The lies were the usual ones, but for de Camp. I must tell you some of the tales, sometime, of Minister of Relations Dampatrick Jerry, of the Institute, C. 4. 390.43. A galactic person. But for this Probability Zero, "Efficiency," by Colin Keith. 'Twas an old gag, and he got rid of it admirably.—Joe Gibson, 224 North High, Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Fifth Freedom

by John Alvarez

He didn't consciously know what it was that made him a conscientious objector, stubbornly determined to have his way. He didn't find out till he got what he wanted—

Illustrated by Kramer

> —to be found in the final war of the twentieth century none of the lighter elements present to some extent in all former struggles. It was a grimly determined fight against extinction from the first few months.
>
> America presented the paradox of an absolute dictatorship with full popular approval, and there was no place in the public mind for anything but the maximum effort from each individual. Conscientious objectors, while regarded as within their rights—
>
> "The Period of Discovery,"
> *Roget's History of Man,* Vol. III.

Wearily, Tommy pulled the hard pillow farther under him, doubling it over in an attempt to find some support that would let him read in the dim light without carrying his weight on an aching arm. But it was no use. The pillow oozed out from under him, letting him down again, and the arm trembled as it took up the load. Soft living, without work and with his every want provided, had left him without the stamina to stand up under the enforced grueling grind of the machine through the long ten-hour stretch, even yet. He was too tired to harbor resentment against the government that had tagged him and probed him, then ordered him out here into the labor camp, away from his comforts, to do such unskilled work as was required of him, along with a motley collection of people of vague abilities and numerous reasons that made them unsuitable for military service.

War! Always and eternally, man went to war to destroy not only the aggressors but to ruin the lives of those whose only crime was a hatred of that war. They'd taken his rocket plane for civilian patrol, filled the newspapers with a hysterical frenzy of hatred, and pressed his favorite music off the air to make room for the propaganda of lust and savagery that seemed their glory; and the little people around him, who'd mostly prayed against it, now seemed to take pride in it, and to talk of nothing else.

He tried again to cut the blaring radio out, with its news and propaganda that neither interested nor impressed him, but dinned remorselessly into his ears, and turned back to the latest Astounding; it had arrived for him only today, and as yet he'd only glanced at the cover and readers' corner. Hopefully, he began on the cover story:

> Major Elliot glanced up from the papers as the captain entered, nodded, and went on reading through the reports.
>
> "Centralia's moving up; big offensive at midnight tomorrow, Captain Blake. I want you to take six volunteers—"

Damn! The boy's lips tightened and he threw the magazine under his bunk, his raw nerves whipped by the fresh insult; even there, war! All day, he'd been counting the hours and minutes until his shift went off and he could find release from the horrible reality, only to find science-fiction as filled with it as all else. He jerked the lumpy pillow up, threw his head against it, and tried to drown out the mutter of voices behind him and rest. It was an hour yet until dinner, and perhaps in that time he could catch a brief nap.

Under him, there was a rustle in the lower bunk, the *thunk* of a bag on the floor, followed by the sound of the built-in locker being opened. Newcomer, he decided, wondering whether to look down or go on minding his own business. Then Bull Travis' voice cut in, already beginning to blur with the "smoke" he obtained somewhere.

"Hey, Bub, there's a bunk tother side of the room. Whyn't you go over there?"

"What's wrong with this one?"

"Conchy on top, that's what! Sniveling 'cause mamma isn't there to protect it!"

"Thanks, but I'm not carrying this bag another step." Tommy looked over then, surprised, to see a thin blond boy of about twenty-four packing his duffel into the hamper under the bunk. Beyond him, Bull was staring at the kid with a sour frown.

"You a damned yellow conchy, too?"

"Nope. Red card, they won't take me. But right now, I wouldn't care if a cobra had the bunk over me."

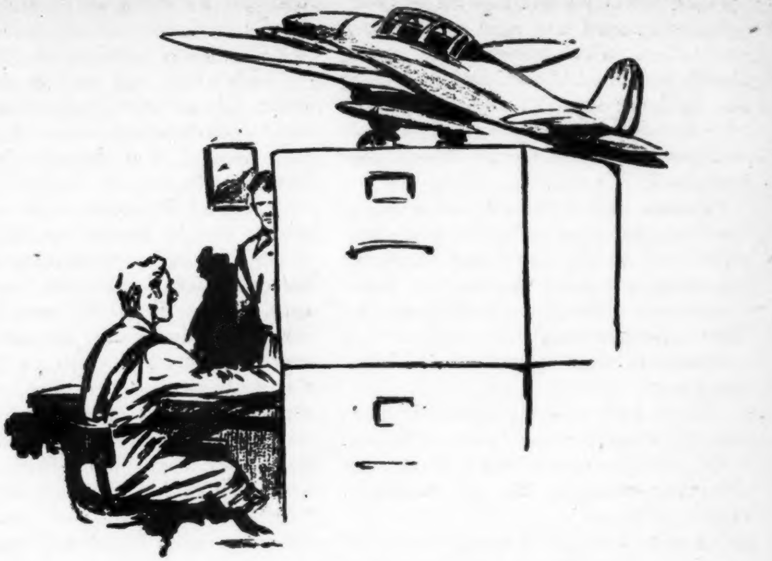
Bull grunted something, then started out to the washroom where he hid his hooch. Tommy turned over again, the words burning into his brain. Conchy, *conchy*, damned yellow CONCHY! Was a conscientious objector any less of a human being?

To the others, he was; there was no question left on that score. Since he'd come, there'd been only two civil sentences spoken to him, and both of them before the speakers knew he carried the little blue card of a conchy. Bull might get drunk and beat up some weakened oldster, or swear all night in a profane stupor, but he had four sons in the war; Tommy was only a thing that had crawled among them to avoid doing his rightful part. And this was a democracy!

Eight months before, without even the warning of broken relations, Centralia had struck eastward suddenly, moving in viciously with heavy ground mechanisms and new antiair guns, while the more peaceful nations had been expecting only an invasion from the skies. Seven months before, they had reached the Channel, and the world beyond Europe had relaxed as their momentum slowed and came to an abrupt halt. And America, as part of the Union, had declared war almost automatically, while the people assured themselves that, with all the surprise element gone and no adequate air power, Centralia was a push-over.

Then, the radio blanket, that cut off all communication with anyone less than a thousand miles from Europe, had dropped as a stunning surprise; ships carrying supplies had gone into the blanket, and a few ships with neither supplies nor men aboard had come drifting out, their superstructures melted away as if they had been sprayed with magma from the Sun. Of the fleet of cargo planes that had been trapped inside there was no word until two months later, when a battered little flitter had come zooming out of the morning mists to land at the Washington airport. Two men were in it, one in American uniform, crying softly to himself, staring at nothing until he died as they were moving him to the stretcher; the other, obviously British, had disappeared with grim lips into an official car, and never been seen publicly again.

But after that, the sudden hysterical drive began; there was no delay, no waiting for public response this time. Every man, woman and child had been registered, quizzed briefly, and told



what to do—or else. For the fit, military service in lightning schools; for those with skills, allocation in the government-commandeered industries. And for the others, such decentralized places as these plywood and scrap-material barracks, with the corrugated-iron workshops around. Congress had uttered one great roar, before the gray-faced English flier spoke to them in secret session; after that, a few Congressmen probably continued to object —privately—but if so, they were snowed under by the ninety-five percent who sat in session, passing bills with monotonous "Ayes." Rather surprisingly, the people showed little resentment; most seemed more cheerful at the positive commands coming out of Washington, rather than less. America had its dander up; that man in the White House was a real leader; Centralia was shivering in its boots. Had they so much as moved out of their blanket yet? No, sir, and they'd better not! Uncle Sam could take care of himself!

Tommy's number had come up, and Tommy's mother had cried while his father looked pleased, somehow; but not for long—not after he learned of Tommy's interview, and the man who had called to see his mother and doubtfully mailed back the blue card. His father had been grim-faced and silent, driving him to the train that would take him to Workcamp 2013-E. "Good-by, conchy! Conscientious!" He'd snorted at that, pulling out a ten-dollar bill. "That's your inheritance; don't bother coming back, and don't write us!"

And the wheels of the train had gone turning along, crying out, "Conchy, conchy!" while he'd sat dry-eyed and anguished, filled with the horror of any passion that could do that to his father, nursing his hatred of war doubly hard to shut out his father's eyes and his weeping mother. Now, here he was.

"Hi," said the kid's voice from under him. "This your magazine? Mind if I read it? I'm Jimmy Lake."

"Go ahead."

"Thanks. Want today's paper?"

"Huh-uh. I'm here as an objector—didn't you hear Bull tell you that?"

"So what? I'm here 'cause of polio. Bum leg, good enough to fly peace planes, but they won't take me on now." Jimmy grasped the edge of the bunk over him with tremendously strong hands and lifted himself easily, glancing at the bunk tag. "Tommy Dorn, eh? No law against a man who figures his God won't let him fight. What's your religion?"

Tommy pulled himself into a sitting position, his lips suddenly whitening. The man at the board had asked the question in routine fashion, his father had asked it bitterly; and he'd watched their eyes narrow at the answer. "It's sort of a personal religion; I . . . I just hate war!"

There was no narrowing this time, though embarrassment showed faintly. "Oh. Well, I think you're wrong, but it's your business. Sorry I butted in. Look, do you—"

"Ladies and gentlemen," blared the speaker across the room, and something in the voice quieted all sounds there. "We interrupt this program to bring you a special bulletin. The President has just announced that two hundred B-43 new model jet-bombers have returned from a special mission over Centralia—operation successful, casualties none! They approached Berlin at eighty thousand feet—a mile over the useful range of antiaircraft guns—unloaded their bombs, made recordings of the damage done, and returned with only one minor injury. Berlin is reported to be a mass of burning wreckage. Further details will be broadcast as released."

The room was roaring then, and Jimmy turned back, his eyes glowing in his pale face. "Lord! And they haven't the air fleet to come back at us!"

"No?" Tommy grunted; he might hate war, but even that hatred couldn't keep him from assembling the hundred little things he'd read and pieced together in a general love of scientific advance that included even military progress. "I suppose they didn't know we had the planes, didn't expect all this? They were preparing for it ten years, after all! And probably the city was just a dummy above ground, anyhow."

"They haven't made a move—"

"Didn't they wait after getting to the coast, only to make a sudden move with their radio blanket to cover it? . . . Oh, stop it! I'm sick of it! Do we have to talk war all the time?"

A reek of liquor struck his nose suddenly, and he looked up to see Bull Travis staring at him, contempt and hatred under the alcohol blur in his eyes. For a second, the man hesitated, just as the dinner bell sounded; apparently it stopped him, for he joined in the rush toward the door. But all through the meal, his eyes were riveted on Tommy, and he was unusually silent. Beside the boy, Jimmy tried to make conversation, but the eyes across the table went on staring, could be felt even when Tommy's face was turned away.

Tommy felt better up on the top of the hill with the work camp behind him, hidden by the bole of the tree against which he sank, breathing heavily from the long climb upward. Tonight there was a full moon, and there was always something soothing about the secret shadows and cool light of that, combined with the clean smell of dewy grass and trees. Here there was neither war nor reminders of it; and nobody from the camp would invade his privacy. He pulled his violin from its case, tucked it under his chin, and began playing, improvising mostly.

Slowly, the disharmonies smoothed down, the savage pace quieted, and the mood of the surroundings crept in to replace the jangle of nerves and bitterness. Slow, clear music came then, swelling up softly, becoming more certain, and carrying in it something that Tommy could not place, but could feel inside him. His eyes roved down the hill, down to an old rock that stood out blackly in the moonlight, and a path leading to it. A note of expectancy crept into the music.

Nine o'clock—and she always came at nine, sometimes with others, usually alone, to sit down there. He wondered vaguely what she was like in reality, but his mind pictured her as a Diana in a gentle mood, stepping down from the moon in the cool of the evening. He'd wondered sometimes whether she'd heard his playing, even dared to hope that it was part of her reason for coming. Somehow, seeing her down there, pretending he was playing for her and that she understood, some of the loneliness left him and he could feel almost happy again. Tonight, perhaps, she would be alone.

But the quarter-hour came and went, and she had still not appeared; he stopped his playing to glance again at his watch, pulled the bow over the strings again, this time in mood music from Tchaikovsky, his eyes still on the clearing.

"Really that bad?" The voice broke in, drawing a harsh discord from the violin as he jumped and swung about. She was standing slightly behind him, smiling faintly, with the light of the moon on her face, and again he thought of a gentle Diana. She was perhaps nineteen and cleaner-lined than the statues he'd seen of the moon goddess, but her face fitted his dreams of it. "I've heard you play, and curiosity got the better of me. Mind?"

He shook his head quickly, making room for her as she sank down beside him. "I'm Tommy Dorn from the men's work camp down there. Was my playing so bad?"

"Not bad; disconsolate." She looked at him curiously, seeing a medium-sized, rather handsome boy, barely come of age. "What's the matter? Wouldn't they take you?"

He frowned, then grasped it. "No, it's not that . . . if you must know, I'm a—conchy! Because of *personal* religion, and because I loathe war!" He might as well get it over and done with; sooner or later it was bound to come out, anyway.

"Oh." Understanding was in her tone. "I'm Alice Stevens, Tommy, stationed over at the women's camp."

"Aren't you going to draw your dress back from me and run screaming away?"

"Should I?"

"Apparently. Two people can't be decent to a conchy on the same evening. It's against the rules, or something."

She laughed, then. "You're even more bitter than your music, aren't you? I'll admit it isn't quite the picture I had of you, but for all I knew you might have been an old worn-out fussbudget or a half-idiot, in spite of the music."

"You're just what I thought you'd be!" He blurted it out, feeling ridiculous, but impelled by the half-confession of her words.

"Silly, isn't it, Tommy? Just because we're both lonely and away from home, I suppose. Let's don't talk about it. Play something, and I'll just sit here and listen and look at the moon. Play about the moon."

"'Sonata' or 'Claire de Lune'?"

"Neither—they're too conventional, somehow. See how our moon makes the grass look like rippling water? Do you know Debussy's—"

"—'Reflections in the Water'? You do like music, don't you?" He caressed the instrument to his chin, his eyes straining sideways toward her as he played, feeling inspiration in his fingers. It was pantheistic music, fitting the magic of the moon and the trees, and the wind that stole up to brush her hair into his face, so the faint perfume teased at his senses.

"You'll come again—maybe?" he asked finally, when the music had led into talk, and that had begun to die down as they found themselves yawning. "Tomorrow night, Alice?"

She nodded, smiling at him, and then he had his violin case in his hands and was going down the hill toward the work camp again; but behind him, he could still sense her presence, and looked back to see her watching him leave. For the moment, there was no room in his thoughts for either the war or the contempt of the others.

"Hello, punk!" The voice came thickly from a clump of bushes beside the trail, and Bull Travis came out in front of him, weaving a little as he walked, his shoulders hunched forward menacingly. "I been waiting for you. So Centralia's gonna beat us, heh? Nice fifth columnist we got with us. You filthy little—"

Futility rose up from Tommy's legs and constricted as a band about his chest, and his stomach tightened inside him coldly. He backed away, feeling his tense face muscles quiver as he opened his mouth, his mind already sensing the impact of those threatening fists. "Look, now, Bull, I—"

"Shuddup!" The fist lashed out then, with poor control, glancing against the instrument case Tommy had thrown up wildly, knocking it aside and out of his hands. Bull advanced, and the boy tried to duck; he felt the impact against his face almost simultaneously with the ground striking the side of his head. It wasn't exactly pain, just a dull giddiness that spread sickly through his whole body.

Instinctively he came to his feet, somehow dodging another blow in a frantic leap sideways, and trying to strike back. But the tenseness inside him ruined his reflexes and destroyed all co-ordination, leaving him hopelessly at the mercy of even Bull's drunken lunges. Another wild one connected, throwing him onto his knees and ripping out a long patch of cloth and skin.

It could have been only seconds the blackness fell over him; he reeled out of it to feel blood pouring down from his nose and to see Bull bending forward. Then a shout came from somewhere, and Bull straightened while Tommy dragged himself to his feet and stared without comprehension.

Jimmy Lake covered the last few feet in an odd hobble, his left leg dragging behind, his right pumping him along. Bull's eyes were on the crippled one, and a savage bark came to his lips as he moved forward. Something lashed out, a vague blur in the moonlight, and Bull measured his length on the ground, to lurch up with pure madness in his voice and spring forward again.

Somehow, without moving from his position, Jimmy let the wild swing slide by, drawing his overdeveloped right arm back and measuring the distance coolly. Then it struck forward, with the left coming behind it in perfect timing. This time, Bull lay where he'd landed, sprawled out like a rag doll dropped carelessly.

"All right, Tommy?" The cripple was breathing heavily, but that must have been from the long climb up the hill; his face was composed, unexcited. "I heard Bull was out for you and came up to warn you, but he beat me to it. Here, wipe off some of that blood; it's almost stopped now. And sit down! You're trembling like a leaf!"

Tommy sat, sick with reaction from the fight, sicker with the shame that the other could see him like this, shaking, his face tear-streaked, his voice almost out of control. "I'm all right. Thanks! I guess . . . you think—"

"A pleasure, Tommy. I've run into his type before. For the rest, heck, I was pretty bad myself the first few times; you get used to it after a while. Never had to do much fighting, did you?"

"No." He'd spent his time with his books and his machines, instead of out with the kids that went yelling up and down the streets. Later, he'd becozzened a rocket plane out of his father and an expensive flying course that replaced the sports of the other boys. Hands and minds were to fight things—natural laws that said "No" where man said "I will"—not other men.

"Only once before!"

"Thought so. Think you can make it, now? Good; and don't forget your fiddle." They started back down, Tommy still nervously exhausted and shaky but trying to mask it and keep up with the brisk pace the other set; running, he'd seemed hopelessly crippled, but the leg was strong enough for walking, awkward though he looked.

On a sudden thought, Tommy glanced up the hill, but there was no sign of her; perhaps she'd left before Bull came out of the bushes. But he doubted it. He tried to thrust the thought aside and listen to the rough instructions on self-defense the other was giving him.

Surprised, hostile looks greeted them as they entered the bunkhouse and moved to their double bunk, but the glances were only momentary and attention went back to the radio. Jimmy caught his arm tensely, and swung him around to face the speaker.

"—too high to be seen. There goes another one; the building's shaking visibly under us! God, the people down there! This can't be explosives; they must have atomic-energy in those bombs! It doesn't stop, but goes on and on, heat boring through even the walls where I'm standing. They've stopped firing antiaircraft; too high, too fast. Some new type of plane. From the window, then, I caught a glimpse of one in a searchlight, and it's big—has to be to be seen at that height! Almost no wings. Somewhere to the right, raw hell burst up then; building's coming down; now I can see it—just a blazing hole in the ground, three blocks long, with fumes streaking upward. People blocks away, trying to run to safety, dying under the heat—no, radiations, not heat. Technical men here just got some instruments together and made readings. Listen, Washington, here's the dope, if I live to pass it on—"

Jimmy cut into the technical stuff that could hold no meaning to the average listener but might be all-important to scientists. "Why don't they cut off his descriptions before he ruins the country's morale?" He looked at the group around the speaker, shrugged. "No, maybe not! Maybe they're being smart. Make anything of what he's saying?"

"A little. It has to be atomic destruction," Tommy snapped. "And not U-235. They've found a way to set off light elements—"

The announcer wound up his report on instrument recordings. "That's the best we can give you, Washington. They can't precision-bomb from that height and speed, but they're still at it. Sometimes flares show up miles away, sometimes they hit the same place again. We're still untouched, but it can't be much longer. We've got a man on the roof trying to spot one falling toward us, but it won't do us any good; the red light'll only tell us . . . *and it's on! Give 'em hell for us, Amer—*"

Surprisingly, almost no words were spoken by the grim group in the barracks after the speaker gave its final sound—like a plucked string breaking in slow motion. "Lights out!" someone said, finally. "We've gotta *work* tomorrow!"

Tommy lay in the dark, tense and sleepless. His fight almost forgotten, the greater fight— He'd been right; Centralia was prepared. But he'd never quite believed it himself, before. Finally he slept fitfully, dreaming that Bull was beating him again while the announcer went on describing it and Alice stood by, shaking her head sorrowfully and binding him tighter with a long rope. Somewhere, the scene changed and Bull became the man at the registration center, shaking his head slowly while Tommy tried to explain his objections and a steady stream of bombs rained down on a crowd outside that was yelling for his blood, unmindful of the destruction falling on them.

Dawn was barely breaking when he was awakened. "Wanted in the front office, Dorn," the messenger announced. "Make it snappy!"

He tumbled into his clothes awkwardly, grunting as the cloth rubbed on sore places or his head moved, setting up centers of pain. Jimmy, under him, was also pulling on his work clothes. "Probably Bull kicked up some lie. I'll go along to set it straight. O. K.?"

"Thanks, Jimmy." They stumbled out of the dark barracks and along the row of one-story buildings, wondering what had gotten the director up at this hour of the morning. Inside the office, the messenger blinked sleepy eyes at seeing two, but pointed to a room at the right, and went back to his coffee. It wasn't the director's office.

"Thomas Dorn, registry 4784?" A gray-clad, grimly pleasant officer of the Air Force was sitting on the desk. "Good; and you?"

"A friend of mine," Tommy answered.

"Um, O. K.; no time for arguing fine points—" He looked at Tommy's face, now well over normal size, and his eyebrows went up. "I thought you hated fighting; we've got you down as a conscientious objector."

"I do hate it—and this doesn't help it any."

"Can't say I blame you there. Sure you're still objecting, or didn't you hear about New York last night?" He noted the boy's curt nod, frowning slightly, and picked up a sheaf of papers. "Well, that's none of my business, exactly. We've got you listed as a rocket-plane pilot, though, and that is. How many hours, what type of plane?"

"My own Lightning Special, late model—confiscated now. I guess I've had it up a thousand hours after completing full instructions. Why, sir?"

The man's eyebrows went up and he whistled. "*Wheeoo*, your folks *really* had money! No matter; wish we had ten thousand with the same experience—Those planes over New York were rockets. By sheer dumb luck we managed to get one down in good shape, half its load still inside; keep that to yourself for a couple of days—with the blanket on, we're not being too careful about secrecy, but there's no use spreading it before it's official. In two weeks, the way we're organized now, we'll be turning out better rockets; and better bombs, too—Centralia isn't the only one with atomic explosives. She just used hers before we were quite ready with ours. Get the idea?"

Tommy got it; his experience with the tricky rocket planes was in advance of all but a few others, and his objection was for "reasons of personal belief," which was a border-line case, at best. His lips set as firmly as the swelling would permit, and the officer noticed the blanching of his skin.

"To be frank with you, Dorn, I wouldn't take you; whatever your reasons, I'm afraid your mental attitude would make you worse than useless. But I can't speak for the higher-ups."

Jimmy stirred beside him, coughing for attention. "I've had a little preliminary rocket training—all I could afford. Wouldn't that help, sir?"

"Sure, but . . . oh, the leg! Afraid they haven't loosened up that much, yet! I'll make a bargain with you, though, young man; you get your friend to change his ideas so he'll be of some real use to us, and I'll see you get in, rules or no rules. O. K., that's all; I've got a hundred other calls to run off and no time to do it in. Back to barracks!"

It was a lovely world, Tommy thought; when things began to look better and you found someone who'd treat you like a human being, all this happened. Beaten up, probably made ridiculous to Alice, one mass of aching bruises, and now this! The sickness that had been in him during the fight had been worse on the surface, but underneath, it disturbed him far less than the half-threat of the officer's words. They couldn't take him into their war! And yet—

"Well, start converting," he said bitterly.

Jimmy shook his head, his eyes on the ground. "I'd give both legs for the chance, Tommy, if they cut 'em off an inch at a time; but I'm no good at proselyting. It's no use— Damn it, why couldn't we have swapped bodies? Why does everything have to be cockeyed for both of us?"

Tommy had no answer, and his mind simply ran around in futile circles as the breakfast was finished and the long grind at the machine began. He noticed casually that Bull Travis chose another table and was unusually quiet, but the fact barely registered; the bully was no longer important, nor was the wearying, unaccustomed work. And under it all was the question of whether Alice had seen the brawl the night-before, and what her thoughts of him were. Maybe he wouldn't go up there tonight.

But night found him stopped beside the bush from which Bull had sprung, putting out a hand to his friend's arm. "Come on up if you want to, Jimmy."

"Thanks, no. I came up to be alone and do some thinking, and I guess you'll be better off without me. See you at eleven." He headed down a side trail, whistling drearily between his teeth on one note, while Tommy went ahead alone, torn between hope and fear, with a dull lethargy numbing both feelings. Anyhow, she probably wouldn't come.

"Hello, Tommy." She was already there, ahead of him, and rose as he drew near. "You're early, too, aren't you?"

So she hadn't seen! Or had she? "How long did you watch, last night?"

"Long enough! Oh, Tommy, it was splendid! I was afraid at first, but when I saw you knock him down the second time, I knew you were all right. I wanted to run down and tell you how glad I was, but I was afraid of being late at the barracks. Your poor face!" There was pity in her look, but as he drew closer to her, her eyes were glowing proudly. He glanced back toward the spot, realizing how easily she could have made the mistake in the tricky shadows of the moonlight.

"I didn't do it. Jimmy Lake, the boy I mentioned, did that. And he's a cripple!"

"Oh." She said it without intonation. Then, with a shrug: "I'm glad you told me the truth, Tommy. You didn't bring your violin?"

"Broken." That had hurt, when he'd discovered it, more than the physical blows to himself, and then had disappeared into the larger worries. "Broken, like everything else in the world!"

"Come here, Tommy. Now—what's the matter?" She pulled him down beside her, putting his head on her lap and brushing back his hair with soft, cool fingers. And, as there has always been, there was magic in it to draw out the troubles and break up the barriers to free expression. She made soft little sounds of sympathy and attention, but otherwise let him tell the story of the morning's interview, his fears, and everything else, without interruptions.

Finally he stopped, and she considered it, her hand still moving softly. "But do you think it's fair, Tommy? I mean, under it all, you must realize that whether you fight or not, others will; aren't you counting on their fighting to protect you and your ideal? If there were no one else, wouldn't you have to fight? You at least tried to, last night."

"I tried to run away, only he wouldn't let me! Alice, I can't reason with this; you can't. It's all inside me. Probably father was right, and it's cowardice that makes me act this way, not con-

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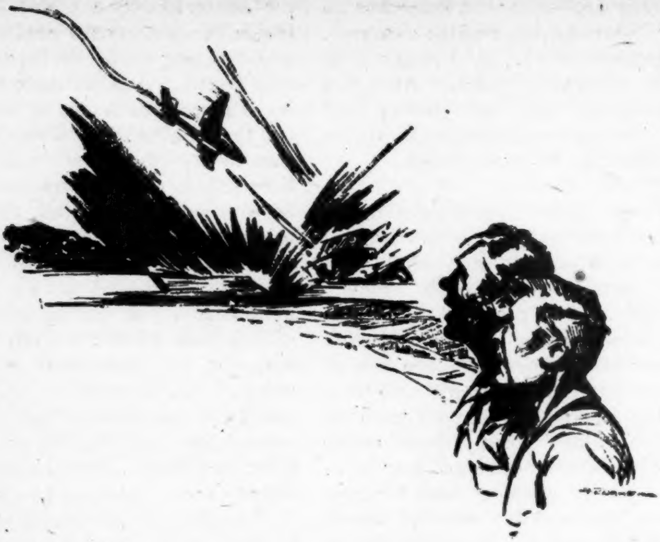

viction; I don't know even that."

"I wonder if a coward would have admitted it was Jimmy who beat up that bully? Or would I feel this close to a boy I knew was a coward? . . . Someone should whip that father of yours; he let your books do all the raising, and did nothing to help you understand the reality and solidity of the world—and then quit you without trying to correct that when you didn't give him reason to boast to his friends. The fault's with his own selfish carelessness, not with you. Tommy!"

"Uh?"

"I wouldn't worry about fighting. They'll need instructors more than fliers, even. That would be all right, wouldn't it, and they'd be satisfied with that?"

It wouldn't—but the relief and gratitude her words brought shot through him like wine, and pure impulse lifted his head off her lap and toward her; she bent forward to meet him, unquestioningly, and the uncertain awkwardness of their inexperience was half the sweetness of it.

Jimmy approached them later, unseen until a twig crackled under his heavy step. "Tommy, it's eleven. Oh, sorry, miss. I thought—"

"It's all right, really. I should have gone before . . . Jimmy, isn't it? I'd like to tell you what I think of you for what happened, but there isn't time, now." She was on her feet, glancing at her own watch, then leaning forward half shyly for a brief good night. "Tomorrow, Tommy, and bring Jimmy if he'll come."

They watched her run down the trail to the old rock, waving as she glanced back before disappearing. Jimmy glanced at his friend, pleased surprise on his face. "She's certainly done you a lot of good, fellow. You're lucky!"

Tommy felt lucky, now. "More than you think, even. Funny how important those barracks and workshops appear in the moonlight; ours, too."

"Yeah, I heard they were going to give them a coat of moon paint tomorrow. They look *too* important, and after last night, nobody's so sure what's safe. Come on, we'll catch the deuce if we don't hurry."

It was a far-off, dim roar at first, coming forward much too rapidly and from too high up. Their heads jerked up toward the cloudless sky. "Planes . . . they can't be!"

"Speak of Satan! Must be bound for Chicago! Picking 'em off in order of size. Tommy!"

He'd seen it, too. A speck that separated from the others, cutting down and growing larger in a fishing streak that dipped, lifted slightly, and dipped again behind them, the roar of its climb following. Something glinted over the barracks roof, and then there were no barracks or workshops! And the lashing of light and things not seen but felt reached out even to the two on the hillside, a radiation that was almost tangible; even after the first violence abated, their bones and teeth seemed to itch, and their flesh to tingle savagely.

"Back! Up the hill! We can't get nearer! That second dip must have been for the women's section!"

"Alice!" Tommy's legs felt the weakness again in them, gone almost at once. And then he was running, feeling nothing but a horrid numb urgency. The hilltop seemed to crawl at him, and he was unsure whether he was running or falling down the other side until his hand hit the boulder and tossed him off into the side trail. Waves of radiation were beating at him, but he was unaware of the danger as he careened down the pathway, almost stumbling over her before he could stop.

"Alice!"

"Tommy! I—help me! No, go back! This radiation—it's weaker now, but—"

"Hush." His arms swung down under her, gently but rapidly, lifting her to his shoulder with a strength that came from outside him, and he turned back up the pathway, unmindful of fatigue or the laboring of his breath. There was a cleft in the rocks near the top where they'd be shielded from radiation on both sides, and he headed for it, as rapidly as he could force himself.

Her face was grayish, pain-filled, already worse than it had been below, and she was limp as he put her down. But she wasn't dead yet; her heart was still fluttering as he jerked forward to listen, and he could hear the erratic gasping sound her breathing made. Minutes went ticking by as he stood staring at her, trying to remember the nearest doctor, torn between the need of staying and the urge to get out searching for help.

Jimmy's uncertain steps broke in on him, reminding him suddenly that he was not alone. "Bad?"

"Where's the nearest doctor? She's got to have attention!"

"Planes of some sort just spilled down as close to the women's camp as they could get—must be medical aid there. Here, give me a hand; we can carry her faster than we can bring them back. If we cut over the hill and around, we'll keep out of the worst of the stuff coming out of there."

"No." Tommy gathered her up, his mind steady again now that there was something he could do without leaving her. "Go ahead, Jimmy, start them coming back to meet me. I can carry her that far. Can you stand it?"

"The leg'll hold up that far." He was off, his hands grabbing at the undergrowth to steady him, his clumsy leaps sending back crashing sounds to mark his path. Tommy started forward, considering a short cut and rejecting it; even if he could take the radiation, he dared not risk her in it. Grimly he forced himself to a pace that he could maintain with his burden, checking back the impulse to run, trying to take up all the bobbing of his steps with his legs and avoid jarring her.

The sound of the other's progress ahead dimmed out and vanished, eaten away by the growing distance between them, and he pumped on stolidly, the skin around his eyes tautened, his mouth pulled back into a tense, straight line. Under the cold and numbness of his surface mind, a fever of thought trickled back and forth in time to his steps, sorting, rejecting, deciding. And step by step, the hill crawled behind him, the undergrowth thinned out, and he was in a shallow ravine that led in the general direction of the three Air Force planes he had glimpsed off to the side of the flaming ruins of the workcamp.

Vaguely, he wondered at the speed with which they'd learned of the disaster and come out in a hopeless effort to help. But the thought and the relief at their presence were lost in the shuffle of his feet, the tick of thoughts in his head, and the leaden ache that was creeping up his arms and shoulders from the burden he carried. He bent forward for the hundredth time, found her still breathing, and went on woodenly.

Crackling twigs gave warning, but only seconds before he saw the men with stretchers coming toward him at a slow trot. "Down here . . . that's it. All right, you men, gently but snap into it! And you, kid, get onto the other one! If you walk another step, you'll be a hospital case yourself!"

Tommy let them lay him on it, not bothering to protest; now that the compulsion was gone, his muscles were slack, his breath rasping in his ears, and his mouth dry and burning. For the moment, there was nothing he could do, and his body grabbed hungrily at the chance to rest on the swaying canvas, though there was no relief for his mind. And it felt queasy to itch *inside* your skin—

Jimmy found him later, his own face drawn with the fatigue of his efforts, and sank down onto the log. "What news?"

"They don't know; this is all new, it seems. They've had experience only with laboratory cases." They'd taken her inside the big hospital plane, turning him back with gentle but firm words and a promise to call him as soon as they could. Now all he could do was sit and wait, trying to hope in spite of the looks they'd given her. "I appreciate—"

"Skip it, Tommy!"

The sound of another step brought their eyes up, and Tommy was looking into the face of the Air Force captain who'd interviewed him that morning—seeming years ago. The man put a hand on his shoulder, sliding down onto the log beside him. "That took guts, Dorn! I guess I owe you an apology for what I was thinking. Mind my talking?"

"No; go ahead, sir." He wouldn't mind anything that would fill the time and take even a little of his mind off what must be happening inside the plane. "I didn't expect you here, though."

"Handiest pilot when we heard of this! At that, there's been nothing we could do to help. And we'll forget that 'sir' business; the name's Kent. Seems they got Chicago."

"Already?"

"Those things travel! Tomorrow, or tonight, we'll actually get started evacuating all large cities, I suppose, but we need a miracle to hold them off two weeks more. Maybe, if—" He dropped whatever he had in mind. "You'd rate an automatic commission for your air hours, you know, Dorn."

"I know . . . Captain Kent, she—in there—suggested I might be valuable to you as an instructor." He shook his head as the other started a quick assent. "But it would be the same thing, killing or teaching others to kill. I can't do even that."

"Then all this hasn't changed your mind?"

"No. Maybe you were right, and cowardice had something to do with it at first, but there was more than that." He couldn't put it into words, the thought that had worked itself out as he'd walked down the hill, and he made no particular effort. "At first, I guess I'd wanted to kill for what they'd done, but that's gone now. Killing isn't right, and hatred doesn't make it more so."

"Um-m-m. 'An eye for an eye'—all right, that's Old Testament; how about Matthew? 'I come not upon Earth to send peace, but a sword—' "

"—'and a man's foes shall be they of his own household.' It won't do any good, captain. Coming down from there, I wanted to convince myself I should fight! I couldn't."

Captain Kent nodded, thoughtfully, passing a cigarette across to each of them as he turned it over in his head. "Ever seen a robin go after another bird menacing its nest? It's pretty much a law of nature that life will kill to defend its own; maybe you don't have relatives in danger—but there's the girl."

"Is bombing women and children over there defense?"

"I think so. Time after time, the tribal pride—the pride of the Holy Roman Empire of the Teutonic Tribes, whose legate walked before kings—has brought this about. Doesn't something pretty drastic seem justified against those repeated assaults on the freedom of others?"

There was neither stubbornness nor agreement on Tommy's face as he shook his head silently, and the other shrugged faintly, admitting defeat. The three sat in silence, studying the ground or the door to the hospital plane, each with his own thoughts, each with a cigarette unnoticed in his hand. Tommy sighed slowly; somewhere, in his emotional mind, he'd been begging to be convinced of the other's rightness, but the arguments were too old to offer any hope.

Above them, there was a low muffled drone that grew into a thunder with a speed that could mean only one thing. The captain's eyes came up first, spotting the bluish streaks that split the sky miles above the earth and came roaring back from the horizon. "Damn them! They think we're helpless—so helpless they're coming back over our defenses deliberately, just as they went out! Now, if—"

With a sudden short cry, he grabbed at the arms of the two others, jerking them back toward the distant ravine, his eyes still turned on the spot of blue fire that came slipping out from the others, downward toward them, cutting the miles in fractions of seconds. Then he stopped, realizing the uselessness of

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flight. "My God! They've spotted our planes in the glare of that ruin! What damned fools we were! No, listen!"

Another sound had cut in, even over the roar of their rockets, higher, shriller, and a streak seemed to shoot off the ground near the horizon and halve the distance in the time it took their eyes to focus, knifing aside the air with a shrill whine. Two others followed, apparently spotted by the Centralian force, for the rocket that had been diving reversed in a thundering blast toward the others. Three streaks moved in toward the group of a hundred, spreading apart as they came, while Centralia's craft bunched and began a gigantic circle to bring them face to face. Somehow, the maneuver was a slow wheel of contempt for the trio that dared to question their right to the stratosphere.

Ken's voice was awed and proud, ridiculously hopeful in spite of the odds. "They did it! They couldn't, but there they are!"

"Atomic rockets?" Jimmy's voice held the same awe.

"Yes. We've licked the inflexibility of mass production; we knew that. But I still don't see how they did it. This morning, those were standard fuel rockets, and the atomic tubes were just coming off the drafting boards. They couldn't shape them—"

His voice choked back as one of the three vanished in a huge sheet of fire that seemed to run across the sky, long before the sound could reach them from the distance. Kent groaned, understanding coming into his eyes.

"They didn't. They've simply jury-rigged the tubes from the captured ship into three of ours; God knows what kind of wire they're using to hold those engines inside our ships. That's what they were talking about, then! No wonder they move like that; they don't weigh a quarter what those tubes were designed for. And inside, they must be packed with our own atomic bombs."

"The explosion—"

Kent waited for the roar that had finally reached them to cease. "No, *our* bombs are stable, except when we set them off; that was the rocket engine smashing up."

Tommy struggled with the idea, his eyes trying to follow the specks that were edged toward the side horizon, almost out of sight. "But what can bombs do against them?"

"Watch!" Even as he spoke, they could just make out the two flares of their own remaining ships suddenly streaking forward into the thick of the enemy swarm. This time, the spread of flame flickered slightly, but they were forced to cover their eyes before it reached full intensity, and when they looked again there was only an empty sky with a few streaks still falling toward the flames that seemed to shoot up from the ground, just out of sight.

"Suicide squad!" Jimmy's face gleamed, as did the captain's, washed with too many emotions for understanding.

"That's it. Somehow, before the rather slim defense of the others could get them, ours got close enough; their bombs were unstable—when ours were set off near them, it spread. Well, there's our miracle; they can't have had time to build more than those we saw, and those are . . . well, 'with the snows of yesteryear,' I guess it goes. That gives us the two weeks we need. My darned luck!"

His face twitched into a crooked smile at their looks. "The rocket men had a lottery this noon for some special volunteers to get themselves killed off on a forlorn hope. The three up there won it. If I'd had another hour, I might have talked one into selling his chance—maybe. Dorn?"

"Yes, sir." They were back on the log that served as a bench again, where he could watch the door of the big ship, and he answered without moving his eyes.

"The higher-ups gave me full authority to do as I liked about your case and a few others; I was going to tell you before all this came up. I'm sending you to a camp out in the Middle West where you'll be with a bunch of other unquestioned objectors; you'll probably be better off there than in any of the workcamps around here."

It took a few seconds for that to penetrate. "You mean, you aren't going to force me to fight?"

"We don't force people here, fellow, not when they're on the level. Look, the nurse wants you. Go on, and I hope it's good news."

The nurse shook her head faintly as he ran toward her, motioning him back into the ship and toward the cot. Alice was lying there, her eyes open and on him, and with the medical staff gathered at the opposite end of the plane. The change in her face, even from what he'd last seen, was frightening, but a smile lifted the corners of her mouth weakly. "Tommy!"

"Alice! You'll be all right? You've got to be!"

"Sh-h-h!" She caught his hand with a feeble movement, drawing him closer. "It's no use; I can feel myself going. Tommy, you're not afraid now! I can see it—that and the other things. It's all going to work out right, isn't it?"

"Everything, except you!" He could see the shadow on her face, knew the uselessness of anything doctors could do, and knelt down to the cot, cradling her head into his arms, feeling the need of tears that could not come, his soul wrenched half out of him toward her.

"Don't feel bad for me, honey. I don't." But pain came shooting over her then, cutting off her bravery, flooding into her expression with nothing either could do to stop it. She gasped harshly, clinging to him, fighting futilely. "Tommy! I don't want to die—when I've just found you! Don't let me die! Kiss me quick, Tommy, before—"

There was time for that, mercifully, and mercifully no more. Dry-eyed still, he groped his way out of the ship, blurred landscape reeling before him, until Jimmy's hand found his arm and guided him silently to the log. His grief was cold and hard inside him, unexpressible outwardly. Then, as the minutes dragged on, the waves of it washed slowly further into his mind, colder and harder than ever, but leaving him free to grope through the jumbled ideas that had been forming.

He should have told her, perhaps, yet somehow she'd known. He'd seen the knowledge on her face before the pain forced it away. "We don't force people, here." Over there, they did—forced them or shot them. Now, for the first time since it had begun, he was free, free from the compulsion to fight against their intrusion into his rights and beliefs, free to take the facts as they came, without the taint of oppression. And the decision had come to him, almost with the freedom, so that it must have been on his face, visible to her. Knowledge had been in her look—knowledge and pride in him.

"What happened to the captain, Jimmy? Has he gone?"

"Not yet. Why, pal?"

Maybe it wasn't logic. It didn't sound logical to fight and protest for his rights until they were given to him, then toss them away. Or maybe it was the highest kind of logic, the kind that could find the real value of the facts and realize that a country where your freedom not to fight was respected was a country worth fighting for, so that those who came after could hate that fighting without seeing it swarm over their lives again. Men had always had to fight for their beliefs, even the belief that fighting was wrong. Maybe the two sayings from the Bible didn't contradict, after all. He came not upon Earth to send peace, but a sword; until the meek should inherit the Earth, some day.

He got to his feet then, Jimmy at his side, and started after the captain. "I just remembered that he agreed to take you if you convinced me, Jimmy. I think we'd better remind him of it."

THE END.

Let's Disappear

by Cleve Cartmill

Sometimes it's just to get away from a creditor—sometimes to get away from the police. But sometimes it's to get away from ruling the planet—

Illustrated by Orban

The little man put a threatening note into his pur: "Does your life mean nothing to you, Mr. Raglan?"

Thorne Raglan tensed pudgy hands on the plastic top of his desk and repeated stubbornly, "You've got to tell me who sent you here, Mr. Gay."

Terrel Gay took no notice of the reiterated demand. His sharp dark eyes fixed on Thorne Raglan's round face. "When one is old," he continued softly, "certain aspects of life have lost their freshness, their desirability. Not that one wills to die, but some of the heart has gone out of living. But you are young, Mr. Raglan. Your life must mean a great deal to you."

Thorne Raglan's blue eyes glazed with slow fury. He spoke carefully, inspecting each word before he released it.

"I've wasted enough time with you, Gay. Either you tell me who your client is or get out."

The little man sighed. "Youth," he murmured. "Impetuous. You would profit by considering the offer of my client. You need money. Hunt Club, Inc., will die without it. I bring you salvation, and you order me out."

Raglan made a visible effort to put his fury on a leash. His short hands clenched. He compressed his generous mouth. He caught a deep breath and held it for a moment. He exhaled slowly.

"I haven't asked anybody for money, Gay. You've got a good education, and you ought to be able to understand even me. I don't want a partner. I especially don't want one who insists I report to him before my clients. I double especially don't want one who won't tell me his name. In this case, I couldn't do it, anyway. I've contracted to find Colin Fane for a group. I've got to keep the contract. You're a lawyer. You ought to know that, even if you're not a very good lawyer."

The little man dropped his insistence. He became patient. "I have told you as simply as possible that you will not be allowed to find Colin Fane except under the conditions I have stated."

"Who'll stop me?"

"I am not prepared to say."

"Wait a minute."

Raglan went across the big room to an apparently blank wall. With his back to the little attorney, he stuck a tiny plastic whistle between his lips and blew. No sound issued from it—no audible sound, that is. A panel of the wall, sonosealed, slid up to reveal a filing case.

Raglan found a plasticard under "Attorneys" headed with the little man's name. A series of cryptic notations sent his short fingers to an equal number of cards scattered through the files. He took this sheaf back to his seat.

"This isn't as complete as it will be," he said, "but there's enough stuff here to cause an investigation of your activities. That Texto deal, for instance. You got out from under and left subscribers holding worthless stock. And a few other things. I could get your license revoked, if I was . . . were? was? . . . if I were in that kind of business."

Terrel Gay showed no alarm. He seemed amused. His sharp face wrinkled into an expression of tolerant interest. He said nothing.

"But I'm not," Raglan went on. "I don't care anything about you. I want to know who you represent, and what his interest is in Colin Fane. But I'll tell you this. I'll start with you, if I'm interfered with. Now, beat it."

The little man rose, went neatly away. He retained his expression of secure amusement, and Thorne Raglan worried a little. Why should Gay feel no alarm? Raglan hadn't been bluffing. The information was on his cards, and was sufficient to launch official inquiry. That would frighten the ordinary shyster who was on his own. Gay was not frightened. He must, therefore, have powerful friends. It was something to keep in mind.

Raglan redistributed the cards, sealed the panel, and called the Planemporium. After some delay, credit-manager Gerald Holt's pleasant features filled the screen of his visivox.

"I was about to call you, Thorny," Holt said. "There's a slight hitch. Can you come over?"

"Hitch?" Raglan wailed. "I was calling you to ask for a . . . an . . . advance."

"I'm afraid that's impossible."

"But the corporation commission's going to close me down if I don't pay my fee."

Gerald Holt blinked. "Why don't you pay, then? You've been prospering."

"But I've put it all back into the business."

"I don't know," Holt said dubiously. "I'm having trouble selling you to the committee. I'm afraid an advance—"

"Is impossible. You just said that. I thought the job was all set."

"So did I, Thorny. I made the contract in good faith. But— I don't know. Something's happened."

"Ain't it wonderful!" Raglan said in disgust. "Here I got a chance to get on my feet, and this happens. You can't do this to me! If you break that contract, you'll have to buy it back."

A look of hurt surprise darkened the square face in the screen. "Thorny! You wouldn't do that?"

"Why not?"

"It isn't my fault that Coffman refused to stick by his agreement."

"Is it mine?" Raglan demanded. "Coffman, eh?" He remembered a card he had on Coffman. He could show that, and— He shook his head impatiently. He wouldn't go in for blackmail, not ever. "Is it my fault?" he repeated.

"But look at the hole you dig for me."

Raglan sighed. "Sometimes I think friendship is the most serious illness of Earthmen. Just when things look good, friendship rears its ugly head and where are you? Back at the beginning."

Gerald Holt smiled. "You don't mean that."

"Of course I don't mean it," Raglan snarled, "but it don't . . . doesn't . . . hurt to dream. I know you helped me start my business, helped me with my speech. It's only right that you wreck it."

"I'm not going to wreck it, Thorny. We'll find a way out. The committee's meeting right away. Can you come over?"

"I suppose so. Have I got time to grab a bite?" As Holt's wide mouth twitched, Raglan forestalled the interruption, "I know, I know. My bank account and my stomach. All I think of. If you—"

"—had spent the first seventeen years of your life in a government orphanage," Holt recited. "I've heard your story, you know. How many lunches have you had today?"

"One less than I'm going to have."

"I think you better come straight here."

"Oh, hell! All right."

Raglan cut the circuit, collected the scanty file on Colin Fane, and went into the corridor. He sealed his office door and headed automatically for an ascending ramp. Halfway up to the landing roof he changed his mind and went down. He'd better walk. His shorts were getting a little tight these last few days. Cheaper to work off the waistline than buy new clothes, business being what it was.

Walking also allowed him to pass several restaurants and inspect their menus. He walked from one side of the street to the other, awash in gastric juices as he remembered the last succulent list and looked forward to the next. This took care of his conscious mind.

His eyes, however, automatically noted the sprinkle of strollers, taxis swooping overhead, and higher up, almost unseen stratoliners. He had sharpened his aptitude for observation and made the process an unconscious part of his make-up.

As he stood before the Planetoid, then, reading the list of delicacies, a face began to niggle at his mind. He pulled reluctant eyes from the parade of Venusian wuk-wuk, Martian babel fish, Kansas City steaks, and sought out the face.

It was quite ordinary, neither fat nor lean. The ears were neither flap nor flat. The hair was simply hair, colored as such. The clothes, shirt and shorts, were common run of the textile mill. The sandals were colorless plastic with ordinary dark soles. He was Joseph Public, no more.

Yet Thorne Raglan knew the man was following him, though the as yet unseen eyes were fixed on the glistening façade of the Vector Arms across the way, as if contemplating taking a room in that Mecca of the moneyed. The unconscious impressions came to attention in Raglan's mind; as he had scanned the menu of Bonnie's Beanery, the man had dropped a coin in the slot of a nearby newscast booth; while at the Stellar Estaminet, the man had paused a few paces distant and watched taxis flit across the sky; and now here.

Coincidence? Quite possible. Raglan went on.

He walked briskly ahead for a few hundred yards, almost throwing off a bow wave of the few who dawdled in the quiet street. He passed three or four restaurants, merely flicking a drooling glance sideways at the posted menus. When he was opposite the gigantic piece of architecture that was Trading Posts, Inc., he paused with genuine interest.

Through its portals passed the most homogeneous masses in the System, bound for and returning from far places. Venus City, Mars Port Main, Urania, and the Belt. He wasted no romantic thoughts on the colonial pioneers, however, as he watched the steady stream flow in and out. He thought of Trading Posts' files. He could use those files. Hundreds of thousands of names, vital statistics, and destinations.

He shifted his thoughts from this futile dream, and caught the shape of his nondescript pursuer from the corner of his eye. Now he was certain, and he went more leisurely to the Planemporium, his mind on the why of this pursuit.

Who had hired Terrel Gay to purchase a half-interest in Hunt Club, Inc., at a fantastic price? Why did he not want Colin Fane found—for somebody else? This man who followed, was he an underling of that same unknown? How would he prevent—or attempt to prevent—Thorne Raglan from searching for Colin Fane? The answers to these questions might be important.

There was the question of violence, too.

Raglan went up to Jerry Holt's office, stood on the identity plate until the door slid up and a voice said coldly, "Come in."

Raglan looked at the group around the table, and their tension hit him like a blow.

For the moment he put aside consideration of the man who had followed him into the building, put aside thoughts of Terrel Gay, of the corporation commission. This situation needed his fullest attention.

A searching glance around the table revealed two sets of hostile eyes, one friendly, and three noncommittal. Of these last, one was a girl.

"Most of you," Jerry Holt said pleasantly, "know Thorne Raglan. Except you and your niece, Mr. Davenport."

Raglan touched his forehead at Herbert Davenport, who returned the salute with a glare, and at Phyllis Davenport, whose face remained blank.

Charles Coffman added his glare to Davenport's. Raglan turned cold inside under the level gray eyes of the big credit manager. He sensed an almost fanatical opposition here, whereas the fussy stare of Davenport aroused a mild amusement.

"Did I interrupt something?" Raglan asked.

Jerry Holt smiled. "To put it bluntly, we're split wide open, Thorny, on whether to hire you or not."

"I thought it was all set. I have a contract. Signed."

Charles Coffman jumped to his feet, towering over them. "It's idiotic!" he snapped. "Good money after bad. Never heard of this . . . this *child* before." He looked contemptuously at Thorne Raglan, who said stoutly:

"I'm twenty-two, and I put away my toys last year."

Coffman snorted. There was a short silence.

"I've tried to tell you, Coffman, that Mr. Raglan can find Colin Fane if anybody can. He has worked for the rest of us and made good on difficult assignments." Jerry Holt spoke smoothly, but with a touch of impatience. "You act as though you don't want Colin Fane located."

"Not interested in him at all," Coffman said shortly, "far as our account with Miss Davenport is concerned. She bought our furs, not Colin Fane."

Jerry Holt sighed. "Coffman, if you'll listen just once, please. Sit down and relax."

Charles Coffman flushed at the patronizing tone, but he sank back into his chair.

"The Davenport estate can't be settled until we find Colin Fane," Holt said slowly. "He is one of the beneficiaries of the great Dave Davenport's will. In the meantime, as you know, Miss Phyllis has bought a great deal from all of us—furs, clothes, furniture, a private plane from Jackson. Credit was extended to her pending the day her cousin Colin came back and settlement of the estate. Well, he hasn't returned, and all of us want to collect on her account."

Herbert Davenport broke in with crisp, precise words. "I have offered a quick solution of that problem, gentlemen. As administrator of my brother's estate, I am legally entitled to auction assets to meet current expenses."

The girl beside him touched his arm, spoke almost lazily but with a force that brought complete silence.

"I'll say it once more, Uncle Herbert and gentlemen. The Davenport estate will not be auctioned, in whole or in part. Is that clear?"

"That," Jerry Holt said dryly, "seems to settle it." As Herbert Davenport started to speak, Holt cut him off. "She can stop you, Mr. Davenport. You can't sell a thing without her permission, unless you can have her declared mentally incompetent. Which she obviously isn't."

"Very well," Davenport said crisply. "I have no wish to raise legal issues."

"I will not agree," Coffman said savagely, "to hiring this boy. Hire a qualified agency, not him."

Thorne Raglan looked at the big man. The cold gray eyes burned as if with an inner light. The sensuous lips were pale and compressed. The large hands were knotted. Why?—Raglan asked himself.

"I still have the contract," he reminded Coffman. "I'll sue you, and collect."

As Coffman purpled, seemed about to explode, Jerry Holt said soothingly, "Wait. I have a compromise to suggest. I recommended Raglan and Hunt Club to you, because I've seen him in operation. He located two deadbeats for me, accounts that were five years old. I had tried to find them, and hired others. We failed. He found them in a week. I know he's competent. So I suggest we give him a week to bring us a new lead on Colin Fane. If he hasn't turned up anything then, I suggest that Miss Davenport agree to auctioning some of her father's estate."

Raglan did not look at Phyllis Davenport. He looked at Charles Coffman, and tried to fathom the feline smile that curled full lips for an instant. Here was a picture of savage triumph, and it bewildered Thorne Raglan. The look vanished quickly as it had come, and he transferred his attention to the heiress of the fabulous Davenport estate.

Her cool dark eyes were on him, weighing, speculating. Her glance bored lazily, easily into him, and Raglan felt a confidence build within himself. He smiled at her. After a long moment, she returned the smile.

"I'll agree to that," she said.

A sigh went round the table. All the faces relaxed except that of Herbert Davenport. He frowned importantly at his immaculate hands.

"Any objections?" Jerry Holt asked. None was voiced.

"Then I guess we break up this meeting. If the new limitations are acceptable to Mr. Raglan. After all, he has a contract, as he says."

Raglan examined Coffman and Davenport again. Coffman returned the glance with cool, confident eyes. Davenport continued to stare at his hands.

"Can I be sure of the co-operation of everyone here?" Raglan asked.

All assented, but Coffman's feline grin returned as he nodded his head and Davenport's eyes were coldly hostile. Raglan shifted his eyes to Phyllis Davenport's, and felt the inner flow of confidence again.

"Sure," he said easily. "I'll take the job."

Events became somewhat confused then, but Raglan remembered three factors which stood out above the movement and murmurs of departure. These were Herbert Davenport's sulkiness, Charles Coffman's expression of dark, secret triumph, and Phyllis Davenport's smile of confidence.

She turned this on full as she said good-by. "Perhaps you'd like all the information we have on Cousin Colin," she said in a low voice. "Don't let Uncle Herbert know, but come to my house tonight. At eight?"

Thorne smiled eagerly, and a trifle foolishly, he thought. His round chubby face colored slowly as she went away.

When they had gone, he turned bewildered blue eyes on Gerald Holt. "What's the matter with Coffman, Jerry? You'd think I had the Martian Rot."

"Thorny, I don't know. My private opinion of Charles Coffman is that he is an extremely dangerous man. He's competent, God knows, but he chills me. He works at high tension all the time, and finds three free evenings a week to conduct a current-events seminar, as he calls it. I attended one, and the regular crowd seems to idolize him. It gave me the shivers."

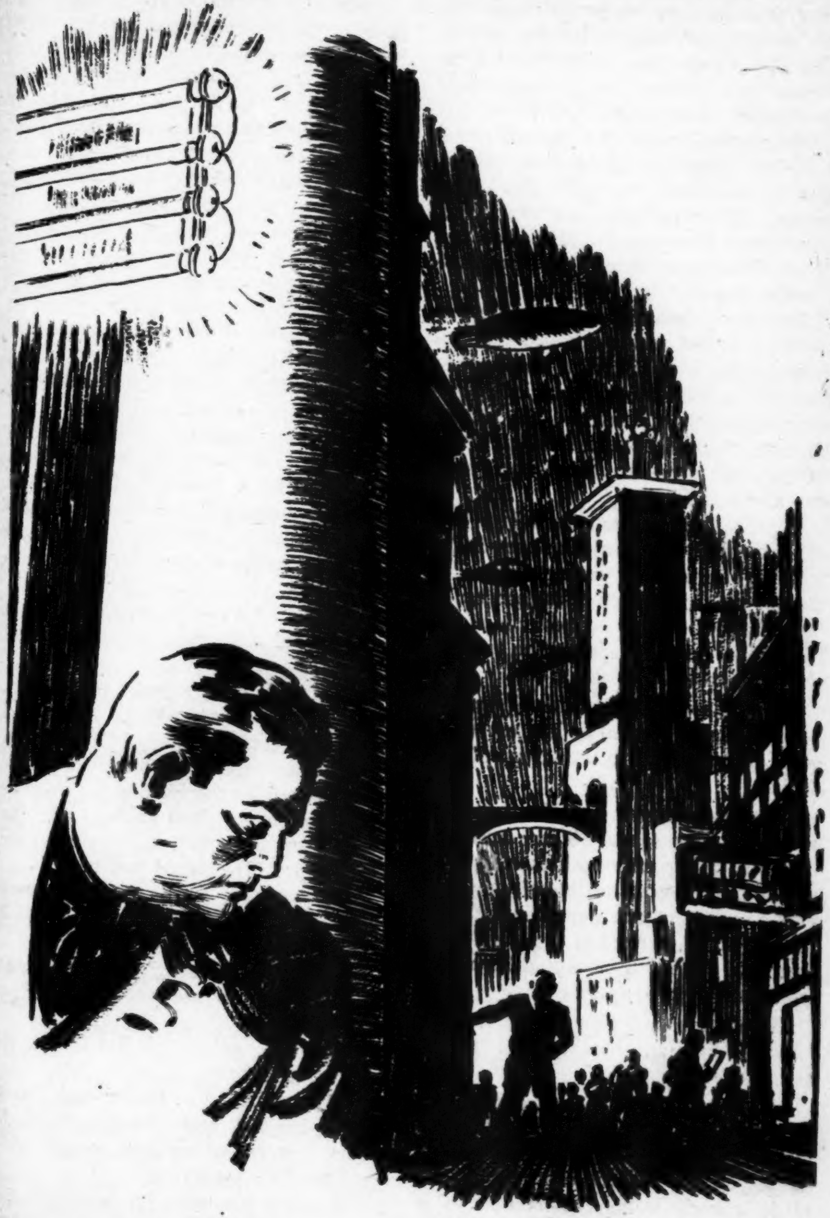
"I'm confused," Thorne said.

As he went back to his office, he tried to fit into some sensible pattern the cross-currents of the conference. Tried to fit, too, the nondescript man who still followed him.

The man was beginning to get on Raglan's nerves.

II.

Through the open ports came the early morning chitter of birds in the trees



which screened the private plane of Colin Fane. Analyzing these bird sounds had become an unconscious procedure during his six months' masquerade on Liberty Island, for they changed when his occasional visitor came along the almost-hidden path through the thick wood.

He worked away at a square metal box, unaware of the outside musical hubbub as such, until the cries sharpened, ceased. With lightning motions of his thin brown hands he shoved the box and a set of drawings into a wall compartment and sealed it.

The transformation he underwent was as if he doffed new clothes and pulled tattered rags over his gaunt frame. The transformation was psychological, however, rather than physical. He became the eccentric old man the village knew, rather than the lean, weathered wanderer he actually was.

His firm mouth went slack in a grin of secret glee; his sharp blue eyes dulled with a glaze of inner concentration; his steady hand developed a tremor as he clawed a lock of gray hair over his face; his rodlike body drooped as he tottered outside to watch the path.

He puttered with a tomato vine which he had planted, feigned an interest which quick glances through the screen of hair denied.

Footsteps became audible, footsteps and a dragging sound. These materialized into a big man with flaming hair who pulled, almost negligently, a small man who fought each step. He stiffened knobby knees, yanked at the large hand that held his wrist, contorted his sharp face with angry desperation.

The big man wore an easy smile, and hailed Colin Fane by the name he had assumed here.

"Hallo, Carl! I've brought you a present." To his small captive, "Touch the head to Mr. Frank, scum! Lively, damn you!" When the little man had made a surly salute, "This flotsam is Jeeks, Carl. Sammy Jeeks. So he says."

"How do you do, Sammy," Colin Fane murmured. "What has he done, Les?"

Leslie Carter motioned toward the plane. "We'd better go inside. We have talking to do."

"You'll rue the day," Sammy Jeeks muttered. "You'll pay with blood. Wait till the Chairman hears about this. Just you wait, you tyrants!"

Leslie Carter looked down at him, said pleasantly, "I've told you, my atom-brained friend, to latch your lip. Your next outburst will bring you a gag of weeds. Tightly packed. Come along!"

He pushed Jeeks after Colin Fane into the ship, slammed him into a seat while Fane sealed the door.

Jeeks glared at the big redhead. "Traitor!" he snarled.

Colin Fane made a question with his eyebrows, and Leslie Carter chuckled. "Let that be a lesson. Don't trust amiable strangers." To Fane: "I pretended to fall in with him. He looked damned suspicious when he sidled into the museum and asked to see the contra-screen case. Of course, when he saw it wasn't there any more, he asked questions."

"Traitor!" Sammy Jeeks repeated.

"I didn't know anything about it," Carter went on in his booming voice. "At least, this specimen thought I didn't. So he did some proselytizing for his precious Chairman. You know, Carl, our friend Coffman is better organized than we thought. He traced you here."

"Cut out the 'Carl' stuff," Sammy Jeeks snapped. "This skinny guy is Colin Fane."

Fane bowed. "Not," he said, "that you'll be able to use your knowledge, Mr. Jeeks."

"Our little guinea pig," Carter said with amusement.

Jeeks whitened. He shrank back against his wall seat, clenched his little hands, compressed his little mouth, widened his little eyes.

"Whadda you mean by that?" he demanded. "Whadda you mean, guinea pig?"

"Tell him, Carl."

"As you know, Mr. Jeeks," Fane said easily, "the exact performance of the contra screen is unknown to these times. My great-grandfather, General Robert Fane, was charged to destroy it after the Outlaws had restored a democracy. Though he disobeyed his orders, and though he passed a detailed description of it down to my grandfather, he still did not describe its effect on life beyond the statement that it was the most terrible weapon known to man. I have reconstructed it here, aside from a few finishing details, and we need some form of life to try it on. Your arrival is fortuitous."

Jeeks blanched again. He attempted to speak, failed. It was as though the words curdled in his corded throat.

"However," Colin Fane continued, "if you wish to co-operate—" He left the sentence hanging.

"Sure, sure," Jeeks gasped. "I'll do anything you say. Just don't turn that *thing*—"

"There's loyalty for you," Carter broke in sardonically. "Coffman, from what I have learned, promises his sheep the universe, and at the first hint of trouble they desert him. He can't be very dangerous."

"He is, though, fellas," Jeeks said earnestly. "You don't know. He's got it all planned out. Get the screen, take over Earth, then cut off the colonies till they agree to be ruled by him. He told me."

"Don't you believe in him?" Carter asked.

"Well, sure, but if I'm gonna be— Well, I'm no good even to myself if I'm dead."

"How did you trace me?" Fane interrupted.

A look of self-satisfaction overspread the small face of Sammy Jeeks. He seemed to grow a little in stature.

"I didn't do it all myself, but I sure did a lot of it. The Chairman gimme the first lead, and I followed it down. I had to quit. It led up to a place where nobody had heard of you. So I went back to headquarters." He shuddered slightly. "That wasn't fun."

"I changed my name the first time," Fane said.

"We got a report later on that," Jeeks said, "and I was sent out again. That time I wound up in a London slum. God!" He wagged his head. "Try and find somebody there. Every house brand-new and exactly alike. Anyway, I found where you *had* been, but lost you. So I went back to headquarters again." He didn't elaborate on his return, but he drew his little mouth down at one corner. "We didn't get anything on you for a year till about a month ago. I traced you here. Or at least I thought it was you. Then this big ape double-crossed me."

Carter grinned. "If you'll answer us a question or two, my good Jeeks, mayhap your miserable little life will remain your own. How big is Coffman's organization, and what are his aims?"

All the co-operation went out of Jeeks. You could see it vanish. His hands tensed, his jaw set, his eyes whitened. He said nothing.

"Sammy," Carter chided, "you have but one life to give. It's worthless to us as long as you don't tell all."

"You . . . you w-wouldn't ask me," Jeeks quavered, "if you knew w-what the Chairman does to guys."

"Which is only a beginning of what we'll do to you, you whining rat." Carter's voice was pleasant, his smile was cheerful, but Jeeks cringed from it.

"I can't tell you, honest! I swore."

"Just a moment, Les," Colin Fane broke in. "I'm ready for a demonstration, except for one operation."

He took the box and set of plans from the wall recess and worked at it silently, glancing now and then at the diagram. Jeeks crouched against the wall, his eyes beady on Fane's brown hands. He looked at the box with a respect amounting to awe. Leslie Carter watched Jeeks.

Presently Colin took a handful of white powder from a plastibox and

placed it carefully in a small chamber of the box.

"Baltex," he said. "It's ready to operate. Let's try it outside. Will you watch over our guest, Les?"

"With care," Carter said in a voice that had lost its amusement, its banter, and was now strained. He jerked the little man to his feet in an abstracted manner, as though he were no longer aware of him as a human being. Sammy Jeeks uttered no protest, but came along with his eyes riveted on the box which Fane held with respectful hands.

He moved calibrated dials on the front of the machine and glanced at a series of notes for confirmation. Then he looked at Carter.

"I'm pressing the stud," he said in a tense voice. "Let's hope my esteemed ancestor knew what he was writing about."

He touched a small protuberance.

Nothing happened.

Nothing, that is, except a whispering crackle among underbrush a few feet in front of them. They seemed to see a series of flashes, spreading to either side in a straight line, but sunlight made them unsure. The crackling was real, however, as was a tiny line of demarcation near the ground itself.

If a knife had sliced through each bush, each blade of grass, it would have left such a mark provided its edge was sharp as an ancient razor was reputed to have been. It was as if a sheet of the most modern transparency had been set into a groove in the underbrush. They could see through, see the trees beyond, yet they sensed the presence of *something.*

Against this Something the several stubs of grasses pressed on either side.

They waited.

They said nothing.

Presently a brown bird detached itself from the limb of a tree and swooped toward them, apparently chasing an invisible flying insect. It streaked along a tangent which promised to intersect that Something at a point some feet to their left; it swerved away after its prey, turned over in the air and plunged directly at the Something, its beak extended and open.

Then it vanished.

Not silently, for a small *pop* jarred their eardrums, as if a pebble had struck the shining side of the plane. This was accompanied by what seemed to be a minute flash, such as would mark a minor explosion.

Colin Fane shut off the contra screen. Sweat beaded his forehead, his face, his upper lip, and chilled each inch of his body. "No wonder," he whispered. "No wonder they wanted it destroyed. A single man could conquer the universe."

"But where are the feathers?" Jeeks cried. "It couldn't just . . . just—" He faltered, eyed Colin Fane with an almost tangible terror.

Then he turned in a frenzy and jerked away from Leslie Carter. He plunged down the path and gained twenty yards before the big man sprang after him.

"Stop, Jeeks!" Colin Fane yelled. "I'll turn on the screen." He made no effort to do so.

The threat brought indecision to Jeeks. His flying feet faltered, and Carter was on him. He dragged the little man squirming back to Fane.

"What I get for being sentimental," he said wryly. "Damn it, I like birds. Especially thrushes. They're the nearest thing to mockers we have on the island. Seeing that poor little devil just vanish unnerved me. It's your fault," he said savagely to Jeeks. "Turn that thing on again, Carl, and I'll throw this nonentity into the screen."

An ecstasy of fright shook Jeeks from top to toe. "P-p-please," he chattered.

There was no fear in Thorne Raglan as he eyed the mask in his visivox screen. There was no anger. His round pink face, with its hint of fleshiness to come, was furrowed and twisted in bewilderment.

"But why?" he asked for the third time. "Who are you?"

Behind the mask, which bore the

stenciled legend, "Public Booth," a man's voice said crisply, "How often must I tell you, Raglan, that it's none of your business? Would I wear this mask if I wished you to know? I repeat that if you will do nothing toward finding Colin Fane in the next week you will be handsomely rewarded. If you do, you will suffer, perhaps die. Good day!"

Raglan fixed the empty screen with gloomy eyes. He was so ill-equipped. If he had a voice-timbre recorder he could identify that masked man, and begin to make sense of this puzzle. If he knew the voice timbre, he could check it against the vital records of all who attended the meeting in Jerry Holt's office. One of those men was almost certainly his caller, and, perhaps, the client of Terrel Gay.

Raglan sighed. Some day he would have equipment to make a reality of his slogan, "Some Day We'll Find You." Some day he would have a great office, with employees, and hundreds of thousands of file cards. Hunt Club, Inc., had a place in the economy of his time, and on that conviction he was staking his future.

He thought now of Colin Fane, another of the hundreds who dropped out of sight each year. Fane differed from the majority of those who decided to disappear in that he owed no bills and would be consequently harder to find. The confirmed deadbeat followed habit patterns: if he tried to beat A out of a bill, sooner or later—perhaps in another place, under another name—he would try to beat B.

Because of this and other knowledge of the habits of those who sought anonymity, Thorne Raglan had made early successes where others had failed. He had found, for Jerry Holt and other credit managers, men and women who had an aversion to paying just debts.

But in Colin Fane he sought a different type, a man who had disappeared for reasons which appeared highly dramatic. Threats of violence and of death indicated conflicts not economic in nature. According to meager information on Raglan's file cards, Colin Fane was somewhat eccentric, independent, wealthy, and a traveler. He might be anywhere in the System.

Raglan shook his head as he examined the cards. One week to conduct a search for which he was not equipped. If he tried and failed, Hunt Club would become deceased, for the corporation commission would take away his permit unless he produced cash or showed prospects of income. On the other hand, he could call Terrel Gay and get the money he needed.

He shook his head again, this time stubbornly. Hunt Club was founded on the proposition that the lost could be located. He felt a quiet pride in the fact that he was not working in the Planemporium accounting department any more. If Hunt Club prospered by *not* searching, the name had no meaning.

Let these anonymous men threaten and offer bribes! He had a job to do and he should be about it.

There was the matter of Charles Coffman. If he was behind the threats and bribes, it behooved Raglan to investigate the man. Whoever sought to prevent his finding Colin Fane for bona-fide clients had an ulterior motive. Discovery of the motive might possibly lead to Fane. Not an orthodox procedure, perhaps, but neither was the situation.

He called a news agency and asked for Shorty. Presently a pair of light eyes, set in a lean, eager face, twinkled at him from under a shock of blond hair.

"Ah, Thorny. How's the old bloodhound?"

"Shorty, can you give me any dope on Charles Coffman, aside from the fact that he's a credit man for Importers, Limited?"

"Wait a minute." Shorty vanished to allow vague shadows to move across the screen and a mush of sound to murmur in the background. He was back in a moment. "Nothing on him of any note. He was born, grew up, had an ordinary education, worked his way up in the business. He conducts what he calls a seminar of current events. I dropped in once. A babe took my eye, and I didn't hear much. What I did, though, sounded like drip. If you're interested, he's got one on this evening. Starts in an hour. You know the place, around the corner from Importers."

"That'll just give me time for a bite," Raglan said.

Shorty grinned. "Bite? Any time. You must have awful good arches. Mine'd break down under the loads you carry out of beaneries."

Raglan scowled. "If you had spent the first seventeen years—"

"—of my life in a government orphanage," Shorty broke in. "Why don't you get a new theme? Look, I got to go. The Mars edition is my pigeon. Call me later if I can help."

Raglan cut the screen and thought about Charles Coffman's dark, triumphant smile. There must have been a reason for it, a reason planted somewhere in the deeps of treachery. He grinned wryly at his train of thought. Making the guy a nickel-entertainment-booth villain, he said to himself.

He went out to a restaurant for a lavish late-afternoon meal, and noted that his nondescript follower was still on the job. When he left for Coffman's hall, the man tagged along and entered the hall a few yards behind.

Raglan took a seat between two elderly women and tried to fathom the expectant hush which held the crowd in motionless quiet.

The faces about him were ordinary, indicating neither brilliance nor moronity. On the whole they were middle-aged, though here and there was a head of white hair—and a few with no hair. Almost none was youthful. They ran the scale of facial beauty, had nothing in common save an expression.

This reflected a deep, quiet excitement, stemming from inner recesses to shine in the eyes which fixed on the empty stage. Raglan remembered the inner fire that shone in Coffman's eyes and saw, felt, a hundred duplications here.

Even the man who had followed him, Raglan saw in a sidewise and backward glance, had now become a spiritual part of this audience. His eyes, too, were afire.

The whole atmosphere, redolent with a sense of impending cataclysm, was suddenly charged almost to the point of combustion as Charles Coffman walked out on the stage and raised large hands, palm outward.

"Do what you will," he said solemnly. "That shall be the law."

Though the words were uttered in a quiet voice, they seemed to emanate from a tremendous and dramatic source of power. They carried occult overtones which sent a shiver down Raglan's spine. This became an outright chill of—awe? fright?—as the audience spoke in a single great voice.

"Do what you will. That shall be the law."

"Daily," Coffman said into the ensuing hush, "we see freedom mocked, hear the hollow phrases of a decadent and dictatorial culture. It is called democracy, and its members are referred to as individuals. Yet is there one among us here or anywhere whose smallest act is not circumscribed, limited, restrained by a maze of social chains? Not one. These chains are called laws, a word whose miserable emptiness is equaled only by the heads of its coiners. We of the Forum of World Thinkers know only one law: do what you will. That shall be the universal law, for our day of triumph is about to dawn."

Raglan marveled at the quiet power of the voice, but felt contempt for the phrases. The man was a crackpot. Despite himself, however, the voice compelled his attention. He listened.

"For our consideration tonight, an event took place today which went unnoticed in the news. It received bare mention in reports, yet it is so significant that the stones should cry out in protest."

Raglan tore his eyes away to examine

the faces again as Coffman read an ordinary news item and placed it on a pinnacle of oratory, and made it a shinning symbol of his creed. Whatever that is, Raglan thought.

The faces were glowing, rapt, intense. The hypnotic effect of that great voice caused the hall to rustle with the sound of quickened breathing. Suddenly the woman on his left flung whispered words at him, her eyes blazing into his.

"Won't it be wonderful," she gabbled, "when he gets *IT?*"

Raglan blinked, edged away, embarrassed by her raw fervor. He wanted out of here. Their attitude might be catching.

His departure caused no break in the flow of oratory, brought no more than a passing glance from a few eyes. He went up to the landing room, aware that he was still followed. His mouth twisted in wry disgust at his worries about Coffman. He seemed harmlessly psychopathic, and whatever his reasons for opposing Raglan's being employed they were unimportant.

Who, then, was having him followed? The uncle of Phyllis Davenport? Fussy Herbert Davenport?

A slow anger stopped him just outside the door to the empty roof. The reasons behind this spying could be ferreted out later. At the moment, he had his fill of it.

When the colorless man came through the door, Raglan swung a long right to the point of his chin. The man's jaw sagged, a comic surprise glazed his eyes, and the starch went out of his knees. He crumpled at Raglan's feet.

A quick search revealed nothing but a small amount of money. Raglan was about to straighten when his fingers touched a hard object and found a Payne coagulator tucked inside the belt of the man's shorts.

Raglan caught his breath. Somebody must think it important that he should not find Colin Fane. He transferred the weapon to his own belt, sucked in his stomach so that no revealing bulge remained, and went thoughtfully to the taxi signal at the far end of the roof.

Presently one swooped down from the local lane and Raglan hurried into it. He made a show of being late to distract the pilot's attention from the form beside the door, and gave him the Davenport address.

He touched the confiscated weapon now and then, and a new wariness grew within him.

III.

Suspicion narrowed Herbert Davenport's eyes as he examined the bland countenance of Terrel Gay, but long conditioning to social usage sent two fingers to his wrinkled forehead in salute.

"I touch the head," he said crisply, precisely.

Gay returned the salute, followed Davenport into a large pleasant room littered with curiosa. Gay blinked at relics of olden days mixed indiscriminately with knicknacks from planets and asteroids.

On a low plastic table was an ancient metal statuette and a dried Space urchin. Beside a tusk from a flying wolf of Astarte hung a piece of old tapestry. In a corner stood a half dozen knobbed shafts so alien to Gay's experience that he walked over to them.

"May I look?" he asked.

Davenport inclined his gray head and Gay took one of the shafts in his hands. It was long and tapered, with a heavy knob turned at a right angle to the main axis. The entire piece seemed to be composed of the historic metal, steel, except for a section of fine-grained wood. Gay looked a question at Davenport.

"My brother," Davenport said with prim distaste, "collected without rhyme or reason, as you see. I have never tried to remember the names of his collections. Those, I seem to remember, were called gawff clubs. Used to kill the gawff, which I believe has been extinct for some time. But you came here to—"

"I beg your pardon," Gay said suavely. "I should have explained my errand. But this room has an impact. My business is briefly stated. My name is Terrel Gay. I was—am, I hope—a friend of Colin Fane."

Herbert Davenport's eyes betrayed faint skepticism, but he said nothing.

"I came here to offer my services in finding Colin," Gay went on. "I understand you have employed an excellent young man whose only fault is youth and inexperience. I thought I might bring an older head to the job, and make progress where he could not."

"I have said before," Davenport replied testily, "and I say it again, I have no interest in a search for Colin. He has always been able to fend for himself, and if he chooses to go off somewhere alone, I respect his right."

"But, my dear Mr. Davenport," Gay expostulated, "he might be in danger, he might need aid. Perhaps he left some note among his private effects, a clue to his destination. He left such effects?"

"He did," Davenport said grimly, "and they are going to remain private."

"Your respect for privacy, sir, is commendable. But don't you think it might be misdirected in this instance?"

"I hadn't thought about it," Davenport snapped. "I don't intend to. Mr. Gay, I am very busy tonight."

Gay flushed at the abrupt dismissal, but did not lose his smile. "I am sorry I intruded," he said, and walked toward the door.

A chime announced the arrival of Thorne Raglan at the door, and when he was admitted he raked the two little men with harsh eyes.

"One way and another," he muttered, "I'm seeing a lot of you guys tonight."

"Ah, the young hunter," Gay said smoothly. "Have you reconsidered, my friend? Remember, if you need money, call on me."

He went out quickly, and Herbert Davenport put contempt into his comment: "First-class friends you have, young man."

Raglan blinked. "I was about to say the same to you. Well, if that's the way you're playing it, all right. I have an appointment with your niece. I don't suppose you'll be helpful in finding Mr. Fane?"

"I won't turn a finger."

"Except for murder?" Raglan sneered.

Herbert Davenport's light eyes popped. "What do you mean?"

"Chum, you're a good actor," Raglan said in admiration. "But I know, see? I've got you labeled. All I have to say is, leave me alone. I took care of one of your killers tonight, with a once-over-lightly. The next one won't be able to report to you."

Davenport had lost his shocked look. He now cloaked himself in a cold dignity, and pointed to an inner door. "If you wish to wait for Phyllis, I will call her."

Raglan watched him bustle away like an angry hen. And as he watched, a sliver of doubt slipped into the conviction that Davenport had had him followed by a man equipped to kill. Then he shrugged the doubt away. The little old man put on a good act, but hadn't Terrel Gay been here? They'd tried to cover up, but they knew he had them dead to rights. What now? If they were prepared to go to such lengths, it behooved him to walk carefully. This girl, this Phyllis, might be in it, too.

One accomplishment on which young Thorne Raglan prided himself was his judgment of human nature. He had been trained in a hard school, where snap judgments had to be right in order to get sufficient food for his great hunger, and had grown to accept his quick summations of character.

In this situation he felt that all the factors pointed to one simple truth: Herbert Davenport did not want Colin Fane found, and was ready to prevent any intelligent search.

He went into the room to which he had been directed, forming his plan of action. He flung one casual glance at the hodgepodge of strange objects and concentrated on his next step.

If the girl were on the square, if her offer of help had been sincere, he might be able to get started. If she were in league with her uncle, for reasons unknown, it might be not only foolhardy but dangerous to spend any time here. He made up his mind: he would rely on his judgment of her.

He remembered only that she was pleasant to the eye, and that she had a will of her own. She and her uncle were—or seemed to be—at odds on the question of auctioning the estate. That militated in her favor if the public quarrel were not assumed.

When she entered he caught his breath. She was more than pleasant to the eye; she was ravishing. Her skin and eyes were clear, her head was high, her clothes were simple and fitted in exactly the right places.

She touched her forehead. "Forgive me. Have I kept you long?"

"Sure," he said vaguely. "Sure. Huh? What did you say?"

She repeated, and he was able to understand more by divination than by recognition of words, for he was still adrift on the emotional wave her appearance had stirred within him. He shook himself inwardly. Snap out of it, he commanded himself savagely. Get back on your toes.

"What did you do to Uncle Herbert?" she asked.

"Do? Nothing. Why?"

"He whispered to me that you were insane, and to watch you. You're not, are you?"

Raglan sighed in vast relief. They were not in cahoots. The uncle was not clever enough for a ruse like this. If he had wanted her to deliver a message to set Raglan at ease, it would have been less subtle than this. He could believe this girl, and he was glad.

He gave her his showiest smile. "I'm completely insane," he said with what he hoped was a plethora of double meanings, "at the moment."

If she understood his intended meaning, she didn't show it. She did all right with a smile of her own. "Good!" she said pleasantly. "Let's get at it. Now what do you want to know?"

After a short pause, he remembered why he was here and began to put questions to her. She told him what he already knew: that Fane had been gone two years. Nobody knew where.

"Have you tried to find him before this?"

"Um-m-m, we put a general inquiry on the visicast some six months ago, but nothing came of it. There's been no organized search." She looked at him keenly. "Mr. Holt seems to think you're the best imaginable. Do you have any ideas where Colin is?"

Raglan grinned wryly. He decided to tell her his troubles. You could talk to this girl. It was commercial, too, he rationalized. He might get an idea.

"I'm groping in the dark, Miss Davenport. All the cases I've worked on so far followed a pattern. They were just guys . . . uh, men or women that were trying to get out of paying a debt. If I do say so myself, I've made a study of that kind. They do this and that, they go here and there, and it's not hard to find 'em. But your cousin isn't trying to gyp anybody, far as I can tell. He had plenty of money. He might go anywhere. I've checked with Trading Posts. He didn't go off Earth, at least under his right name. So there I'm stopped."

She nodded judicially. "That makes it difficult."

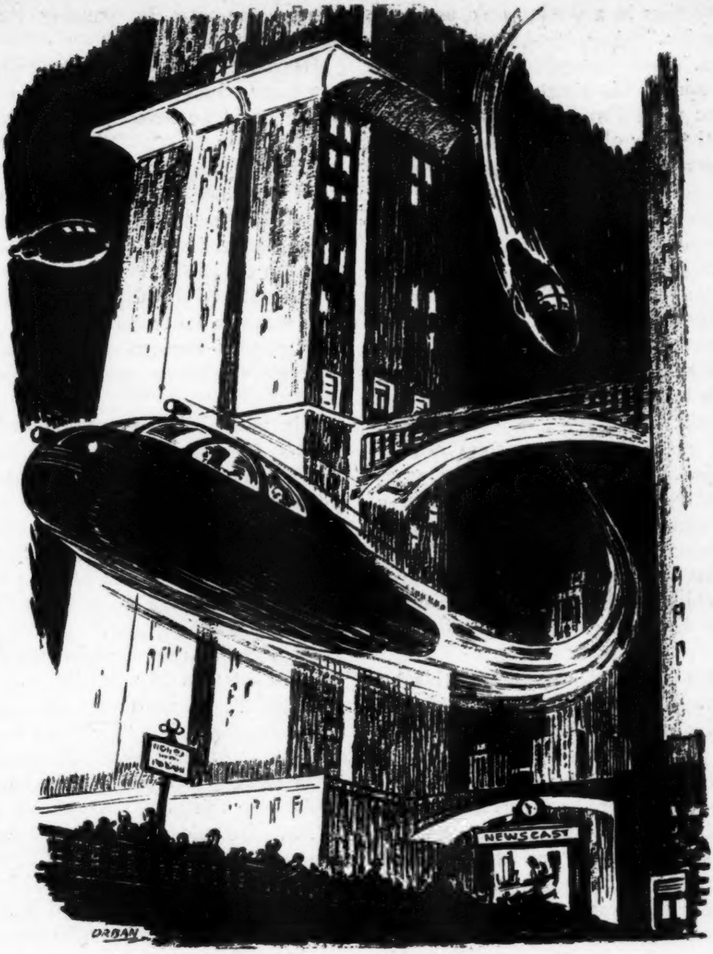
"You got no idea. Unless I know why a man goes away, I just have to guess at where he went. Look, did your cousin leave any private papers that I could look at?"

A change came over her. Her large dark eyes seemed to veil themselves; her attitude of sympathy hardened a little; she withdrew into herself.

They looked at each other in this awkward silence for a moment before she relaxed. Her smile came back. "Uncle Herbert warned me that you might ask that, Mr. Raglan. I promised him I wouldn't show you."

"So," Raglan said thoughtfully, "I was right, after all."

"Were you? About what?"



"About your uncle. Why doesn't he want me to find Colin Fane? Why is he willing to go to any lengths to stop me?"

"Goodness!" she exclaimed. "How melodramatic! I'm sure you don't mean *any* lengths."

"Any lengths," he said firmly.

"I think you overrate Uncle Herbert's activities. All he ever does is putter around with his collection of historic weapons. He wouldn't actively oppose anybody on any question. But he has this passion for privacy. Not a passion, really; he just respects the rights of others. He says that if Colin wanted to go away, it was his own business and nobody else's."

Raglan merely twisted a faint smile.

A little fire came into her eyes. "He's a good man!"

"All right, I won't argue the point. Look, didn't you say you didn't want any of this"—he made a large gesture—"auctioned to pay your debts?"

She stuck out her round chin. "It won't be!"

"But you agreed that, if I didn't find

out anything in a week, you'd agree to the auction."

"Yes."

He spread his short hands. "Well, you see what I'm up against. I don't know that any of his private effects will give us a hint, but they might. You've almost got to let me see 'em, if you don't want these things sold."

"Uncle Herbert would be very angry."

Raglan shrugged. He waited.

"After all," she added, "he's the legal administrator. And aside from that, I'm not anxious to offend him. He's my father's brother."

Raglan waited.

She drew her brows together in indecision. Presently she sighed, gave him a troubled glance. "I suppose you're right, Mr. Raglan. Come along. Let's hope uncle doesn't find out."

"What would he do?" Raglan asked.

"Nothing, really. It would just put a strain between us."

Raglan reserved opinion on this as he followed her to a small room near the roof. No clutter here. This was a plain room, with little furniture other than a projector and a rack of reading tapes.

He watched her sharply as she opened a small panel on a case of supersonic whistles. She blew one after another of these, setting in motion an inaudible series of sound waves. An infinitesimal noise behind him jerked Raglan's eyes, sent his hand toward the coagulator hidden in his belt.

He saw a panel sliding upward to reveal a recess, neatly packed with what appeared to be possessions a man would not share with others. Reading tapes and small plastiboxes lined a small series of shelves.

"There they are," Phyllis Davenport said.

They went through the objects systematically, first examining contents of the boxes. Some of these held keepsakes, such knicknacks as a man will put away for sentimental reasons. There was a diary of travels, too, and Raglan spent some time in glancing through this.

He made notes of places which had impressed Fane more than others. These could be investigated, time permitting.

Then the reading tapes. One of these was Colin Fane's will, sealed against the time of his death. Others were common statistical data. He put one or two of these on the projector, but after a brief glance restored them to their places.

A series of tapes contained the autobiography of General Robert Fane, a moving spirit of post-revolutionary times.

"He was Colin's great-grandfather," Phyllis Davenport explained.

"Have you read this?" Raglan asked, indicating the autobiography.

"Of course."

"As I remember," he said, "there's nothing in it that would help us locate Colin. We'll come back to it if we can't find anything else."

He picked up the remaining spool. It was labeled "To My Son."

"Colin's?" he asked.

She examined it. "He has no son," she said. "At least, that I know of."

"Is there any other place where he would keep things?"

"No. He told me that much a long time ago."

"Then shall we look at this?"

She assented, and he placed it in the projector. They read as the tape unwound.

> I have disobeyed my superiors on two occasions. One of these is historic, and related in my public memoirs. It is with the other I wish to deal here, with the contra screen.
>
> I owe Secretary of War Cameron my life, and I hate to disobey him here. I do so in the interests of my country.
>
> You, young Robert, can read his histories. I won't tell you here how the Outlaws took over the Centers and re-established a democracy. I tell you only that we used the contra screen to demonstrate our power after we were in control of Plastic Center, and the others capitulated with no loss of life.
>
> Then I, commanding general of the military, was ordered to destroy the screen. It is such a terrible weapon. Its destruction was

ordered to safeguard the future, for if some unscrupulous person should get it into his hands he could rule the entire race.

I have not destroyed it. Here are my reasons.

If the occasion should ever arise when this continent, or this planet—for interplanetary travel seems imminent—were threatened from without, it is my contention that we should be able to fend off invaders. The contra screen gives us this protection.

I inclose herewith the plans. The case itself I have placed in the Museum. The case is harmless. It will not operate unless the inclosed plans are followed exactly. I repeat —exactly.

I charge you, my son, or your son, or his son, to reveal this to no one. I charge you further with the protection of your country, or your planet as the case may be.

Only as a last resort are these instructions to be carried out.

If I do wrong, I hope I may be forgiven.

ROBERT FANE.

Thorne Raglan and the girl looked at each other. "This," he said solemnly, "is something! We looked through that stuff. The plans are gone. Fane probably has them. What now?"

"I guess it really did exist, then," she observed.

"'In the Museum,'" he quoted. "There are a thousand museums. I can't search 'em in a week. I'm not sure I want to find him, anyway. Maybe he's gone loopy, and wants to rule the universe himself. If all the old wives' tales about this screen are true, he could do it."

Herbert Davenport spoke from the doorway. "If you have quite finished, my dear Phyllis, in revealing private matters to a stranger, I should like to speak to you."

They whirled to face the little man. His gaze was level, seeming full of controlled fury.

"I did what I thought was best," the girl said stoutly.

"No doubt," was her uncle's dry response. He shifted his eyes to Raglan. "You will please go?"

Raglan stared thoughtfully at the gray-headed man. "If you're behind these things that have happened to me today, then you know where Colin Fane is and why he went there." He took the coagulator from his belt. "I really ought to kill you, I guess."

Herbert Davenport's eyes never wavered. His face did not whiten. His hands remained relaxed.

"You must be insane," he said quietly. "I'll admit that I have an interest now in Colin's whereabouts, for I should like to add that contra-screen case to my collection. If I can aid in tracing him, I should be happy to do so."

Doubt assailed Thorne Raglan again. Surely no man could act this well, and yet— He shook his head in confusion. He pushed the coagulator into his belt—at least, that was his intention. His hand slipped. The weapon clattered to the floor.

Herbert Davenport leaped toward it, snatched it from under Raglan's fingers, twisted away as Raglan lunged at him. He held it out, butt foremost.

"Your gun," he said. "I tried to catch it before it hit the floor, in case it fell on the activizing stud. I advise you to be more careful."

Raglan made no move to take it. "I guess you're right," he said, white-faced. "Thanks. Keep it. I've never needed one."

Davenport laid it negligently on a table, stood waiting for Raglan to go.

"Listen," Thorne said. "I'm mixed up about you, but I'll figure it out. One thing I know, though, you're not going to shove your niece around. I practically forced her to show me these things. She didn't want to."

"I wish to see my niece about a private matter," Davenport said with dignity. "Not that I owe you an explanation."

Raglan felt abashed. He made his farewells, and went toward the landing roof. He needed a quiet, private place to think. Somewhere in this mixture of facts he might find one that would lead him to Colin Fane.

He needed to place the uncle.

As he emerged onto the landing roof, he saw a waiting taxi. He stepped back toward the door.

But he had gone far enough for a

man to step between him and the door. This man was big but Raglan wasted no thought on size.

He side-stepped the man and swung a left to his stomach. Before it connected, somebody else hit him on the jaw and constellations swirled inside Thorne Raglan's head as he fell heavily.

His brain seemed quite clear as he scrambled to his feet. "All that pretense," he thought. "Uncle Herbert picked up my gun, talked me out of carrying it. So this was the reason."

Cold, calm rage launched him at the nearest of his assailants. The other kicked him in the stomach. He fell writhing on the plastic surface, opened his mouth to shout for help. He uttered no cry. What was the use?—he asked himself. The uncle arranged this, and probably has Phyllis where she can't hear any of it.

He got up again. His jaw was in perfect position for a hamlike fist. Consciousness blanked out.

They caught him as he wilted, and shoveled him into the plane.

IV.

Herbert Davenport, for the first time in Phyllis' memory, seemed embarrassed. He waited until Thorne Raglan's footsteps died away before speaking. During that period, he kept his eyes down. She replaced the reading tape and closed the panel on Colin Fane's personal effects.

Then, "Phyllis," her uncle said, "I want to show you something, and made an apology."

She gave him a puzzled look. "I'm sure no apology is necessary, Uncle Herbert. What do you want to show me?"

"It's in my study. Will you come?"

She followed to the large room with its display of weapons. These went as far back as the first ray gun in the New Era. Beyond that were knives and guns with shapes unfamiliar to modern eyes.

He took a plasticase, long and narrow, from a small table, and opened it. She looked at two halves of a broken piece of metal. She raised puzzled eyes.

"It's a sword," he said. "A long time ago they were carried, mostly as ornaments, by military officers. This is an ancient piece of steel which your grandfather picked up somewhere. Dave had little interest in it beyond protecting it from oxidation with oil. I doubt if he knew anything about it. He bought this case for it, I believe, simply because it had belonged to his father."

"Oh, yes, I remember. Father wanted to throw the . . . uh, sword away, but decided not to. He bought the case, all right."

"Exactly," said Herbert Davenport. "It has no intrinsic value. Now quite by accident I ran across a reference to this sword, and have spent a large part of the last year authenticating its origin. I found that it once belonged to a general, a man famous in his day. His history is unimportant, save in that he had a brief notoriety and a cometlike career. Now I have proof that the sword was his. He broke it across his knee as he surrendered. The exact time and place is a matter of disagreement between experts, but I can prove that it was his. That is the reason I have been trying to auction enough of your father's estate to pay your bills."

Phyllis blinked. "I don't follow that."

"Very simple, my dear. If this sword were offered for sale as simply a broken piece of metal from a dead century, it would sell for very little. I could buy it. I want it, before the facts about it become known. If, however, it were offered for what it is, my modest means would prevent me from owning it."

The girl was silent for a few seconds. Bewilderment creased her brows.

"But I thought you knew," she said finally, "that father intended you to have it. I remember he said to me, 'Herbert would probably like this for his collection.' That's why he bought the case, to save it for you."

The little man sighed. "I wasn't

sure," he said, "so I apologize."

"I think you should apologize to Mr. Raglan. He thinks you're trying to stop him from finding Colin."

"I shall. I'll call on him tomorrow."

Thorne Raglan could have used an apology at that moment or any other expression of friendliness. He found none in the face of the man who sat watching him as he recovered consciousness in the taxi. The face he saw was big and expressionless. It was completely objective, as if Raglan were a fly, and the man had never seen one before.

"Where am I?" Raglan muttered. Then he saw the other man at the controls of the plane. He turned to the man beside him. "What goes on?"

The man pursed his lips. "Oh, nothing much. Just a ride."

"To where?"

"Oh, just around."

"What do you want from me?" Raglan demanded.

"Your company, chum," the man said pleasantly. "You got no idea how lonesome we get. Eh, Joe?"

"You're right, Chuck," the pilot called back. "We get lonesome, all right."

"Where are you taking me?" Raglan asked.

"Well, now, I tell you," Chuck replied. "It sort of depends on you. Know what I mean? It sort of depends on how much co-operation you'll give us. Eh, Joe?"

"You're right, Chuck."

Thorne Raglan said nothing. The shock of the blow on his jaw was wearing off. Aside from a slight soreness, he appeared to have suffered no ill effects. His brain was clear, and he turned his thoughts on what he had learned.

Colin Fane had made—or could make—a contra screen. Somebody wanted it. Uncle Herbert, according to all the evidence. The problem was to locate Fane. He had plans and instructions, but he didn't have the case. The case

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was "In the Museum." Where was that?

"Now we don't want you to be mad at us," Chuck broke in. "We got our orders. We want to know if you found out anything interesting at Davenport's. Eh, Joe?"

"You're right, Chuck."

Interesting, Raglan thought, anything interesting. Yes, he had found a girl, and a scurrilous old man. He had seen a slice of history which implied, rather than said, that tremendous events were in the making.

"Well, Chuck, you know what the Davenport house is like," he evaded, "all cluttered up."

"Sure, sure, chum. We know about that. But what we want to know is, did you find out anything about Robert Fane? Eh, Joe?"

"You're right, Chuck."

"All I know," Raglan quipped, "is what I read in the history tapes."

Chuck sighed. He laid a big, gentle hand on Raglan's arm. "Look, chum. I'm not stupid. Maybe you found out something, maybe not. I want to know."

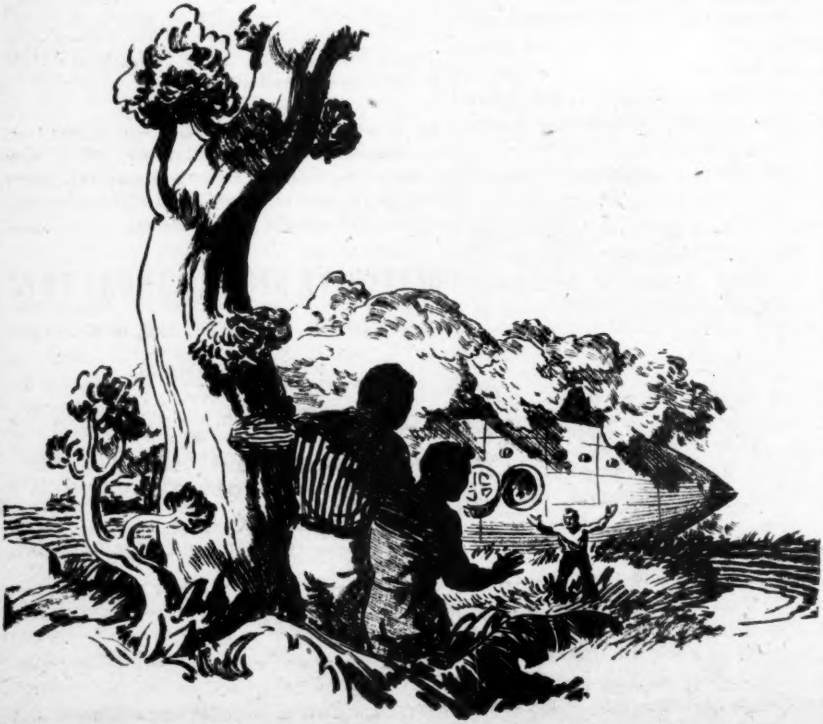
"Suppose," Raglan fenced, "I give you some news. What will you do with it?"

"Don't be roundabout," Chuck said patiently. "I'll tell you, all right, because you won't be able to do anything with what I tell you. If you got news, I'll take it to the Chairman. He's the one who wants it."

"Who's the Chairman?"

Chuck was quiet for a few moments. Raglan glanced through the port at his shoulder, saw the city gleaming beneath, saw other taxis streaking past on this level.

"Let me make something clear, chum," Chuck said. "Maybe you heard the story of the guy condemned to die. They gave him his choice of how he



would die, and he said he'd take acute senility. It's something like that with you. If you tell us without trouble, all we'll do is go up to ten thousand feet or so and dump you out. But if you play it the hard way, being dumped out will be like dying of old age compared to what will really happen to you."

"But why?" Raglan demanded. "Where do I fit into this?"

"All I know, chum, is what I'm told. So I'm told to go out to Davenport's and pick you up. Maybe you know something about Robert Fane. Tell. And tell it quick. I got a date."

"Suppose I don't know anything."

"Look, chum. You know something, all right. If you didn't you'd have said so, and we'd have dumped you out by now. Eh, Joe?"

"That's right, Chuck."

"So it's up to you," Chuck went on. "Either we get it the easy way or the hard way—for you."

Raglan felt the quiet assurance of the voice, and shriveled a little inside. Then the truth he had been looking for hit him like a blow: the Museum. At the time Robert Fane wrote his autobiography, there was only one museum. *The* Museum, on Liberty Island. Liberty Island, symbol of democracy, where The Outlaws had worked out their plan of conquest. There Robert Fane had put the contra-screen case. There he might find Colin Fane.

And who, he thought indignantly, is Colin Fane? How about Thorne Raglan? These guys talk about killing me, and I have lots of other things than that in mind. How about me? How to get out of this mess?

To stall, that was the problem, and possibly the answer.

"Listen," he said to Chuck. "Where can we go? I don't like this instability. I don't like to be off the ground when I talk seriously about things. Why don't we go to my office?" To get on the ground, he thought. I might have a chance there.

"Listen, chum," Chuck said wearily. "You don't have to go somewhere else to tell what you know. You can tell that here. So make up your mind."

Raglan considered. If he told them what he knew, he'd be thrown out of the plane, according to Chuck. On the other hand—

"Then to hell with you," he said. "If you won't make it easier for me, to hell with you."

Chuck sighed. "All right, Joe," he called in a tired voice. "He's going to be tough."

They changed course. Through the port Raglan saw the lights below swing in a big circle, and, as nearly as he could tell, they were headed back on their course.

This went on for some time.

"I see it," Joe said.

"Park right against the door," Chuck ordered.

"Right, Chuck."

They began to angle down. Raglan felt his heart crawling into his throat. He didn't know where they were going, but he felt that his chance, if any, was coming.

"Look," he said, "I didn't mean to sound so hard to get along with. But I'd like to know a little more what I'm up against."

"Shut up!" Chuck said. "Against the door, eh, Joe?"

"Right, Chuck!"

When they came to rest, Chuck took a coagulator from somewhere and pointed it at Raglan. "I don't want to burn you, chum, but I will if I have to. I'd a lot rather have your information, but I got an out, no matter what. If I have to burn you down, I can always say you didn't have any info. Remember that. Now you march out ahead of me, and remember about the funny moves."

Raglan pushed open the door of the taxi. Almost within reach, he saw the door of what appeared to be an apartment house, and he made plans instantly. He seemed to hesitate in stepping down to the roof, then jumped and slammed the door of the taxi.

He jerked open the door of the building so that it blocked egress from the plane, and ran around to the rear. He hid behind the tail and listened to Chuck's cursing as he pushed futilely for a moment. Then all was quiet for a second or so, after which he heard them jump to the roof.

"Come on!" said Chuck's voice. "He's inside somewhere."

Their footsteps pounded off into the building, and Raglan ran to the taxi summons cursing his inability to fly a plane. He made a mental note to learn as soon as he had the money.

He watched the door of the building while waiting for his taxi, but with a kind of despair. There was nowhere to go if they came out before his taxi arrived. He was not forced to meet this problem, for presently a plane dipped out of the night and he jumped inside.

"Just get going," he told the pilot. "I'll tell you where later."

The plane zoomed off. Raglan, looking back, saw Chuck and Joe emerge from the building, spy his own taxi, jump into theirs, and take off after him.

"Would a double fare help you to get away from those guys behind?" he asked the pilot. "One of 'em thinks I ought to marry his sister."

"I gotcha, Mac," said the pilot. "Ain't women hell? Watch me ditch 'em!"

Before the ride was over, Raglan wished that he had never made the request. The wish was momentary, as they swooped illegally between two buildings and seemed about to crash against an overhead crosswalk. He closed his eyes, caught his breath, flung hands before his face. The plane apparently dipped under the crosswalk, for Raglan's stomach bumped his chin suddenly.

"They can't do that, I bet," the pilot called back cheerfully. "Damned if they didn't!" he cried a moment later. "Well, I guess we'll have to show 'em some real flyin', huh, Mac?"

Raglan didn't answer. They were between buildings, the smooth walls flying past on either side. He felt that a piece of his courage slipped out to each building they passed.

They zoomed straight up, and left his stomach behind. His heart was still with him, though, he thought. He had it between his teeth. He glanced fearfully out the port, and saw the city drop away. A lighted plane swept up out of the lights after them as he looked.

Then began a series of maneuvers that left him finally bewildered and completely limp. They looped, spun, whirled, dived, turned, swerved, dipped, and zoomed until he lost all sense of direction.

"Guess we lost 'em," the pilot said presently. "Good thing I was handy for you. Where to, now?"

"Anywhere," Raglan said faintly, "that's solid."

"You're the doctor," said the pilot, and dived.

With a great mental effort, Raglan kept his insides intact until they came to rest on a roof. He paid the pilot, cast a look upward. He saw no pursuers, and hurried down to the street. He found a public visibooth, and donned the mask.

When he had the news agency, he asked for Shorty. "Shorty," he said when the pleasant face was in the screen, "I'm in trouble. I need help. This is Thorny."

"You look just the same," Shorty said cheerfully, "in a mask or not. What's the matter, did her father find out where you live?"

"I'm serious, Shorty. I need a plane."

Shorty's eyes widened. "Can't you hire one? I can lend you some—"

"It isn't money," Raglan cut in. "I need one that can't be traced."

"Oh, you're running out on the charge, huh?"

"Charge? What charge?"

"There's a warrant out for you," Shorty said. "Wait. I'll get the details." He disappeared while Raglan tried to fit this new fact into his jumbled patterns. Shorty popped back. "A guy named Garrick swore out a warrant for you. Says you slugged and robbed him. Did you?"

"No!"

Shorty glanced down at the stat, raised round eyes. "Say, this is supposed to have happened on the roof of Coffman's hall today. Did you go over there?"

"Yes," Raglan answered, "but I didn't—" He broke off, remembering the incident of the nondescript man who had followed him, of whom he had relieved the coagulator. "Listen, Shorty," he said desperately, "it's a plot. Believe me. No, wait, I won't appeal to you on the grounds of friendship. I'm on the trail of one of the biggest news events in history. I'll give it to you, exclusive, for transportation."

"To where?" Shorty asked.

"Liberty Island."

"What for? There's nothing over there but a museum."

"I know it. Shorty, I'm in earnest. I can beat the charge this . . . what's his name? Garrick? . . . lodged against me, and his crowd know it. All they want to do is hold me up. Shorty, this is important!"

"Take it easy," Shorty counseled. "Don't go off the deep end. A story, huh? Well, that's different. We have a plane. I guess I could get it for you. I could meet you tomorrow, about noon, say."

"Noon?" Raglan cried. "Hell, I could be dumped in a lake by then. I've got to go now."

"I can't get away, Thorny."

"But you've got to, Shorty!"

"Wait a minute," Shorty said. "Let me think."

He thought. Then he raised his eyes, took his hand away from his chin. "Do I have to go with you, Thorny? I mean, there's a kid here who can pilot our plane. Can he take you?"

"Kid? What do you mean, kid?"

"Well, he's about fifteen, but he's quite remarkable. Remarkable is what I mean."

"I don't know," Raglan said, "I don't like to get a youngster in trouble. There may be lots of it."

"He can take care of his share," Shorty said.

"Then will you have him pick me up?"

"Where are you?"

"I don't know. Wait till I—" He halted, thought. "I'd better not go outside. Can you trace this call?"

"Sure. Wait."

Shorty went away, and Raglan stared at the drifting shadows on his screen. When Shorty returned, he was grinning.

"What do you mean, you don't know where you are? You're in a booth about thirty feet from the door of Coffman's hall."

"Some day I'll tell you the story," Raglan said. "I guess there's no safer place than Coffman's roof for me. Will you have this kid pick me up there? By the way, what's his name?"

"Craig Marten. He's our office boy. But don't let his age throw you. He's all right. Now don't forget, Thorny, I get the story, exclusive."

"I promised, didn't I? Well, send over your boy wonder." As Shorty touched his forehead, Raglan added, "Thanks a lot, Shorty."

"Bring me the story," Shorty said, and cut the circuit.

Raglan went up the public ramp to the landing room where he had been earlier. He waited in the shadows beside the door where he had slugged—what was his name?—Garrick. He watched the sky, and in a few minutes saw a plane swoop out of the dark. He remained hidden as it settled on the roof. When a voice called, "Come on out, Raglan; I know you," he stepped forward.

"Who are you?" he asked the youth.

"Craig Marten. I'm your pilot. Are you lucky!"

"That's as may be," Raglan said, and entered. "I want to go to Liberty Island."

"Latch on to something," Craig Marten said. "We've been in the air ten seconds already."

V

Leslie Carter did not smile as Colin Fane entered his office. He waved a big hand at a chair.

"Coffman's here," he said.

Fane's lean face grew more solemn as he folded his gaunt frame. "Sammy Jeeks was right, then. They've traced him."

"You'd better take my advice," Carter said. "Or else somebody's going to get killed."

Fane's thin mouth set in subborn lines. "I will not turn the screen over to the war department or anybody else until I've had more than one person's advice."

"What are you intending to do, then?" Carter demanded. "Just sit out there in the forest and let people walk into the screen?"

"I don't know," Fane almost groaned. "I've thought of nothing else for a week. Where is Coffman?"

"He's over at the Inn. I expect him here later. He came this morning, with a couple of thugs. I can stall him for a while, but if he knows that Sammy was here, he'll look around the island. Somebody will mention the eccentric hermit who lives by himself, and he'll come out to see you. He apparently isn't a fool. He has added several obscure numbers and come out with the right answer."

"I've pieced that story together," Fane said. "It doesn't indicate any superintelligence in Coffman. I told you, I think, that he came to me with the story that he was interested in my great-grandfather's history?"

"Yes, and that you dug around in what he'd left and found the plans. Then you went off with them on a search for the box."

"What I didn't do," Fane said, "was to bring along a tape which Robert Fane had left for his son. I intended to, but in the hurry I must have overlooked it. That tape had a lettter on it. Now here's what must have happened. Coffman came back the next day or the next, and found that I was gone. He probably told my cousin Dave that I'd promised he could look at my great-grandfather's effects. You know how Dave was, expansive, generous, and glad to show off any of the collections in the house. So Coffman read the letter, and began to form his organization. His problem was to find me and get the plans, no matter how."

"Where did you learn all this?"

"Partly from Sammy Jeeks, and the rest was just reasoning."

"How is Sammy, by the way?"

"Unhappy," Colin Fane said dryly. "I threw a screen around the plane despite his protestations that he was through with Coffman. The box is hidden outside the screen itself, and he can't get to it."

"Maybe he's telling the truth."

"I can't take a chance, though, until we dispose of the screen, one way or another. Listen, try to pick a flaw in this: suppose I go home and talk this over with my cousin Herbert. He's a level-headed little man."

"And suppose," Carter countered, "that you're intercepted en route. Then what?"

"The chances are slim, on that score."

"Slim? You've been followed here. You pick a flaw in this: suppose I get a war department man out here and we turn it over to him."

"Les," Fane said impatiently, "I've told you how I feel about that."

"All right, then let's destroy it. That pulls Coffman's teeth. He's just a harmless semimaniac then."

"I don't want the responsibility, Les. Maybe it's something that should be

If they win ...only our dead are free

These are our enemies.
They have only one idea—to kill, and kill,
and kill, until they conquer the world.
Then, by the whip, the sword and the gallows, they will rule.
No longer will you be free to speak or write your thoughts, to worship God in your own way.
Only our dead will be free. Only the host who will fall before the enemy will know peace.
Civilization will be set back a thousand years.
Make no mistake about it—you cannot think of this as other wars.
You cannot regard your foe this time simply as people with a wrong idea.
This time you win—or die. This time you get no second chance.
This time you free the world, or else you lose it.
Surely that is worth the best fight of your life
—worth anything that you can give or do.

Throughout the country there is increasing need for civilian war service. To enlist the help of every citizen, the Government has organized the Citizens Service Corps as part of local Defense Councils. If there is no Defense Council in your community, or if it has not set up a Service Corps, help to organize one. If one exists, cooperate with it in every possible way. Write this magazine for a free booklet telling you what to do and how to do it. Join the fight for Freedom—now!

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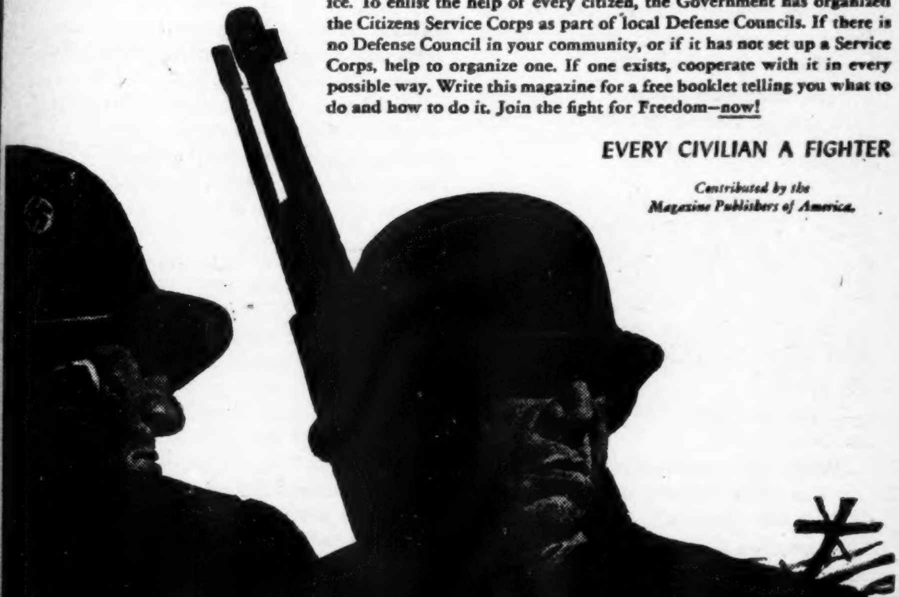

preserved. Why didn't Robert Fane obey orders!"

A chime sent Carter's finger to his communivox.

"Yes?"

"Mr. Carter," said the operator's voice, "a Mr. Coffman is here. He wishes to see the curator. He won't tell what he wants."

"I'll be down in a few moments. Tell him to wait." He cut the switch, looked at Fane. "Well, it begins."

"I'm going back to my camp," Fane said, rising. "If you come out later, yell before you get close. I'll have the screen set up from inside my plane."

"Don't worry, I'll start yelling from the time I pass the first curve on the path."

Craig Marten was apologetic. "That's what I get for being so cocky, Mr. Raglan. I pushed the wrong keys on my panel last night and we missed the island. I'm sorry."

Thorne Raglan looked out at the Pacific, a perfect circle of aquamarine bounded by gray horizons.

"The beauties of nature," he growled, "are maybe costing me money." He turned to the boy pilot. "Where are we?"

Craig shook his head. "Just somewhere. I put it on automatic when I started to get sleepy. You were already asleep. When I came to we were here. I've been circling till you woke up. If we head into the sun, we ought to sight land before long. Then we can locate the island."

"Let's go, then. Got anything to eat on this crate?"

"Well," the youth replied hesitantly, "in that locker there's something. But it's for emergencies."

"Any time I miss breakfast," Raglan muttered, "it's an emergency." He rummaged in the locker, took out hermetically sealed cartons, read their labels, grimaced. "Reminds me of the orphanage. Good, plain, nutritious. Want some?"

"I don't feel like eating," Marten said lugubriously.

Raglan swallowed a couple of bites, felt his normal good nature returning. "Come, come. All is not lost." He gestured at the screen beside the pilot's seat. "You could call your office and ask them to get a fix on you."

Craig laughed shortly. "If they ever found out I'd missed a whole island, I'd never hear the last of it." He narrowed his eyes at Raglan. "You won't tell Shorty, will you?"

Raglan chuckled. "I think you'd dive into the water right here if I didn't promise. No, I won't tell him. Here, eat some of this gupp. You'll need the energy later, maybe."

Craig threw in the automatic controls and came aft. He joined Raglan in the rigorous repast, glancing ahead now and then. Presently the coastline, like low-lying smoke, pushed slowly up over the horizon, and Craig became the pilot again.

"We're south," he said. "Liberty Island is there." He pointed northeast.

Raglan goggled along the line of his finger. "I don't see it."

"Neither do I, but I know. I recognize the landmarks ahead."

"If you say so," Raglan said dubiously. "By the way, I'm not Thorne Raglan there. Can I use your name?"

"Sure," Craig said, frowning, "but why?"

"The police are after me. Didn't Shorty tell you?"

"No." Craig sighed as he changed course. "Golly, I'll bet your job is exciting."

Raglan snorted. "Don't get romantic. I've never run into this kind of thing before."

"What name will I use, Mr. Raglan?"

"You won't use any. You'll stay in the plane. I'll want a way out if I need it. What's that smudge up there ahead?"

Craig peered. "That's it. We'll be there in fifteen minutes."

"We'll land at the Inn. Do you know the place?"

"Sure, I've been here before."

The plane circled the landing roof of Liberty Inn, and came to rest beside another. Raglan went to the door, hesitated.

"On second thought, you'd better come along," he said. "I don't know how long I'll be here, or what I'll find. We'll take a room. You'd better use your own name, and I'll call myself Herbert Davenport. Remember that, if you have to address me before anybody. Say, this ship here looks like one I rode in last night." He examined the taxi, shrugged. "Couldn't be, of course."

They registered at the desk, went up a ramp to their room, and washed their faces. Raglan eyed his in a mirror, then stuck it into the shaving cabinet. When he withdrew, it was shining, scented and pink.

"I'm hungry," he said. "That bite on the plane was just an appetizer. How about you?"

"I could eat the ears off a brass monkey," Craig said, "but is it all right if I borrow from you? I didn't have time to get any money."

Raglan grinned, jerked his head, and led the way down to the dining room. They took a secluded table which commanded a view of the door, and ordered.

Halfway through the meal a familiar form passed the door, and Raglan averted his face. He didn't want Charles Coffman seeing him here.

Then a chill of apprehension struck him. Charles Coffman? What was he doing here? He laid his knife and fork aside.

"I've got to go," he said hurriedly. "You finish your breakfast, then go up to your room. If we have to leave in a hurry, I want to know where to find you."

Craig looked up calmly. "Where are you going, and what do I do if you don't come back?"

"Don't worry," Raglan answered. "I'll be back."

"I wish I knew what this was all about," Craig said. "So I'd know what to do if things get tough."

"Just do what I tell you," Raglan said.

He went out of the dining room, wondering if Charles Coffman had recognized him in that quick glance with which the big man had swept the dining room. He walked through the lobby as if he had all the time in the world, and down the front path.

He had no eyes for historic monuments. On either side were old buildings which had housed manufacturing units of the Outlaws. Here Pier Duvain and his followers had plotted a revolt, and from here had carried it to a successful conclusion. But Thorne Raglan cared nothing for this now. He was wondering how and why Charles Coffman was here.

His eyes were on the path, soft yet almost indestructible product of modern textile mills. He frowned with concentration, and paid no heed to objects on either side.

When Chuck and Joe appeared before him, then, his jaw dropped with shocked surprise.

"Turn around, chum," Chuck said cheerfully. "We got places to take you. Eh, Joe?"

"Right, Chuck," Joe said, and emphasized his agreement with a coagulator which he allowed to peep from under his tunic and center on Thorne Raglan's midriff.

"You got away from us last night," Chuck said, "but not again. Eh, Joe?"

"Right, Chuck!"

"Where do you want me to go?" Raglan asked.

"Back into the Inn and upstairs," Chuck ordered. "The Chairman saw you in the dining room. He's waiting for you on the second floor."

"The Chairman?" Raglan echoed. "Do you mean Charles Coffman?"

"You labeled him, chum."

All of Raglan's theories tumbled about him like dead leaves in the fall. Here he had picked Uncle Herbert for the role. Coffman was a crackpot, pure and simple. How did he fit into this?

Realization that he might have guessed wrong slowed his steps, and Chuck prodded him. "Step along, chum. We don't want to burn you down, but as I told you last night, we always got an alibi, eh, Joe?"

"Right, Chuck."

Raglan walked past through the lobby, with the two men on either side. To the casual eye, they looked like three friends returning from a sightseeing tour of the village. Raglan kept his eyes away from the dining room as they passed its door. No need to get young Martin into this.

They took an ascending ramp, and Raglan followed nudged commands until they came to a closed door. Chuck stepped on the identity plate and waited until the door slid up and a voice called them inside.

Charles Coffman sat and eyed Raglan with a mixture of triumph and speculation. "So you have the young fool with us again," he observed. "Sit down, fool."

Raglan flushed. "Let's don't be subtle. You want something. What is it?"

"All in good time," Coffman said smoothly. "May we increase your comfort? Chuck, bring the young fool a glass of wine. Give him a cigarette."

Chuck leaped to obey, and Raglan narrowed his eyes at the big man who seemed to have collected an attitude of superb self-confidence from somewhere. "What goes on, Coffman?"

"Exactly what I was about to ask you, fool. Why are you here?"

"I'm on vacation," Raglan said dryly. "Lots of people spend theirs here."

Coffman's face contorted with fury. "Tell me the truth!" he roared. "Why are you here?"

Raglan said nothing. He watched Coffman. Some emotion beyond Raglan's comprehension was beginning to surge inside the man—reflected in flaming eyes, working mouth, big hands corded on the arms of his chair.

"I'll tell you why you are here," Coffman said in a controlled whisper. "You thought to steal a march on me, but my agents are everywhere, fool! Everywhere! You are going to die, but first you are going to give me what information you have on Colin Fane. I gave you a chance to live. I sent my representative to you with offers of money and power. You could have become associated with *me*. You refused. So now you die. But first tell me. Now, do you hear?"

"Information?" Raglan said, attempting an easiness that did not come off. He was confused, too. Terrel Gay had come from Herbert Davenport. Of that he was convinced. "Information? I gave that case up. There was so much opposition that I decided it wasn't worth while."

Coffman leaned forward, pushed his face to within an inch of Raglan's. "Don't—try—to—trick—me!" he whispered.

Raglan drew back, said nothing.

Coffman straightened, eyed Raglan intently, got to his feet. In a quiet voice, he began to speak.

"I shall give you a choice, young fool. You may co-operate with me, and so live to be rewarded beyond your wildest dreams, or you may die. Choose!"

A chill knotted Raglan's insides. He could take the bluster, and feel contempt. But this calm statement brought a pallor to his face, a real fear to his heart.

"I have thousands of followers," Coffman went on, "In all parts of Earth. They, too, shall be so rewarded. Theirs shall be a freedom now denied them by idiots. Theirs shall be a power. I have sought the means by which such freedom may be attained. I am about to find it. You are in a position to aid in this great work. But with you or without you I shall find it."

He had begun to speak with that hypnotic rhythm which Raglan had heard on the preceding afternoon.

"I shall not be thwarted again!" Coffman cried. "I have been prevented by fools from reaching my rightfully deserved position in the scheme of things. I, who have brilliance where they are ignorant, who have insight where they are blind, have been forced to live on less than equal terms with imbeciles. I, who am destined to greatness, have been held in mediocrity by my inferiors. That day is done. The new dawn is breaking. You may partake of the joys and delights thereof, young fool, or you may join the others in oblivion. You may make your choice."

Raglan clenched his hands to keep them from trembling. There was such an impersonal disregard for his life in Coffman's manner that his throat muscles knotted and speech was impossible. He opened his mouth, tried to speak, tried to tell Coffman to do his worst, but the words would not come.

In the middle of his effort, a chime sounded, and a face filled the door identity screen. The face of Craig Marten.

Coffman let out a low curse. "What does that boy want?" he snarled, and allowed the door to open. Craig plunged into the room.

"Oh, Mr. Raglan . . . I mean, Davenport," he said. "I've been looking everywhere for you. You said you were going to your room, and there's a man outside who—"

His plunge continued as he spoke, carried him headforemost into Joe's stomach. Joe grunted, sat down, attempted to draw his coagulator. Craig kicked him on the chin and Joe sagged, eyes glazed, to the floor.

At the same time, Raglan took his cue and threw his drink into Charles Coffman's face. He and Craig both turned on Chuck and, catching him still in stunned inaction, made short work of him. Craig relieved Joe of his weapon, and they ran out with the sputtering

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cries of Coffman following.

Raglan led the way to the lower floor, and they hurried through the lobby. As they reached the door, they heard feet pounding behind, and broke into a dead run.

"This way!" Raglan cried, and led the boy toward the edge of a thick forest which grew down to the edge of the village.

The mouth of a path presented itself, and he plunged down it. When it curved out of sight of the village, he drew up, panting.

"That was great work," he commended Marten. "How did you happen to do it?"

"I saw those guys flanking you, and thought it was funny you'd come right back," Craig said. "So I followed you upstairs, and heard some of what that big man said to you. I didn't think they'd stop me from coming in. You worked pretty swell, Mr. Raglan. What do we do now?"

Thorne Raglan creased his brows. What, indeed, did they do now? First of all, he had to think this situation through. Coffman's presence here and his identification as the Chairman threw Raglan out of focus.

"If they didn't see us come in here," he said, "we'll go on down this path. When we find a place to stop, we'll stay there till night. Then I can come back and see what I can find out. If we are followed, we'll just step to one side and let them go on by. After they've gone, we can go back to the village and get out of sight somewhere."

They stood tensely, listening. No sound of footsteps came and, after fifteen minutes or so, Thorne Raglan motioned to the boy. "Come along kid. Better give me that coagulator."

Craig handed it over. "Yes, sir. Say, Mr. Raglan, do you suppose you could give me a job? I like this a lot better than the news agency."

"We'll see," Raglan said. "Keep an eye peeled for signs of life along this path." He paused. "On second thought, I always feel better without these things."

He threw the coagulator off in the forest.

"If you're not handy with 'em," he said as they moved along the path, "you can be made to look silly."

VI.

Sammy Jeeks was unhappy. He sat in the sun before the plane, placed knobby elbows on knobby knees that put a sharp chin in the cup of his little hands. He stared at the path which disappeared into the forest.

At some indeterminate point, a few yards in front of him, the screen was an invisible and frightful barrier. The Chairman might come bursting out of that forest at any time, walk into the screen, and *pouf!*

Thus would vanish his last chance to prove his complete inner change to Colin Fane. He couldn't fight Coffman, he had no chance even to insult him. He could only sit here in the sun and watch the big man vanish.

There was a certain satisfaction in the contemplation of such an event; there would be more in watching it. But Fane did not yet believe that Sammy had shifted his loyalty, and Sammy was near to tears.

He had tried to tell the gaunt eccentric of how he had been lured by a bright dream into Coffman's organization, how his life, precarious at best, had taken on a new lease when the Chairman's representative had found him newly released from jail and offered power and riches. He had tried to make Fane understand that he, Sammy, had not really believed as thousands of economic unfortunates seemed to believe, that the Chairman offered salvation.

But his words were halting and vague. They did not make it clear that Sammy felt uneasy about the bright dreams conjured up by the eloquent, hypnotic Coffman. They did not distinguish between Sammy's native intelligence and the unreasoning desires of those who regarded Coffman as a miracle man.

For a whole week, Sammy reflected, he had lived here with Fane in enforced intimacy. During that week, he had failed to convince the man that he had a new friend, a new—well, slave was not a pretty word, but it came near to that.

Now, while Fane took a nap inside the ship, with one hand on the screen's case, Sammy could do nothing but keep watch. And he'd get no credit for it, he thought bitterly, beyond a pat on the head. Good old Sammy! Good little dog!

Footsteps brought him out of his gloom, and he jerked his head around to warn Colin Fane. But two men—no, one man and a boy—came out of the forest at a brisk pace, and Sammy leaped toward them. These two did not look like followers of Coffman.

"Stop there!" Sammy cried. "Don't move, or you're dead, maybe!"

Thorne Raglan halted, eyed the little man with amusement.

"Maybe?" he said. "You're not armed, and my young friend here could tie you into knots. Why all the bluster?"

"Never you mind," Sammy said. "Just stay where you are till I know who you are and what you want. Well, give out!"

Raglan continued to grin. "We're just taking a walk. Any objections?"

"Plenty!" Sammy said. "You're not wanted here. Go away."

Raglan frowned. "I don't like your attitude, my friend. If you're not more courteous, I'll come over there and bite you." He took a step forward.

"Stop!" It was almost a scream of pure terror.

"Hey!" Raglan soothed. "Take it easy. Nobody's going to hurt you really."

A voice spoke from behind Sammy, and Raglan saw a tall, lean individual in the door of a plane hidden among the trees.

"It's all right, Sammy," he said. "I've turned off the screen." He raised his voice. "But I advise you gentlemen to stay where you are. I have an extremely dangerous weapon here. Who are you?"

"Holy comets!" Raglan breathed. "Say," he cried, "are you Colin Fane?"

Fane touched the box which he held in his hands, and a little crackling came from a few feet in front of Raglan. This seemed to be accompanied by tiny flashes.

"I warn you," Fane said. "I have set up the contra screen immediately before you. A step or two will be fatal to you. Now tell me who you are, quickly!"

Raglan backed away. That tiny crackling sent a stab of terror into him.

"Look, I'm a friend," he yelled. "I'm looking for you."

"So are others," Fane said. "Not friends."

"But I—" Raglan began. He broke off as footsteps came out of the forest behind him. He whirled to see Joe, Chuck, and Charles Coffman hurrying single file toward him and Craig Marten. "Here come the guys who are trying to do you harm," he called to Fane. "Let us in there, will you?"

"I don't know you," Fane replied. "I never saw you before. Stay where you are."

By now Raglan's pursuers were only a few feet away. They assumed catlike grins, all three, and rushed.

"Don't let 'em shove you back," Raglan said in a low voice to young Marten. "I don't know what that screen is, but it's worse than these guys."

He pressed forward to meet the attackers. Somewhere a voice cried, "Let me go out there, chief! Let me through!" He identified it vaguely as the little man who had halted them. Then he went down before Joe, but managed to double him up with a kick as he fell.

From the corner of his eye he saw young Marten butt Coffman, heard the impact and Coffman's enraged howl. He became too busy with Chuck then to see any more.

Chuck fought as he talked, with a quiet and calm deadliness. His great fists smashed into Raglan's face through his guard, and one eye closed shortly. Raglan ducked, jabbed, and kicked, but blow after blow mashed his features and brought a screen of blood over his remaining good eye.

He landed one good blow which staggered Chuck for a space of five seconds. In that time, he saw what sent an ecstasy of terror through them all.

The little fellow, who had stopped them, was fighting Joe in a sobbing rage. Outweighed, outfought, battered and torn, he was not outhated. Through his bruised lips poured a stream of fantastic invective. He implied that Joe's ancestors were of a dubious humanity, and that Joe was less. Through it all, Joe swung away methodically at what had been a face.

Suddenly the little man broke and ran toward the plane. Joe plunged after him. His small quarry ducked to one side, flung out a foot. Joe tripped, stumbled, and went into a staggering attempt to regain his balance.

Then he exploded.

Where Joe had been was a blinding flash, a jarring *boom*, then nothing.

In quiet horror, they all looked at the place where Joe had vanished. The whole forest was deathly still.

Then Craig Marten, who was sitting astride Charles Coffman with one of the big man's arms locked behind him, got up and was sick beside the path.

Sammy Jeeks lay chattering where he had fallen, uttering meaningless little cries.

Charles Coffman got to his feet, stumbled off toward the village in an awkward run. Chuck leaped after him blindly, caroming off a tree or two before he seemed to find the path.

Raglan went to Craig Marten, threw a comforting arm across his shoulders and led the white-faced, shaken lad onto the path. Sammy Jeeks stood up.

"Will you all come here?" Colin Fane called.

They approached, and instinctively

hurried past the spot where Joe's pyrotechnical death had occurred. Fane's face was grave, his mouth pulled down in a slanting line of grief.

"I didn't know that man," he said quietly. "Poor, duped devil. Why couldn't it have been Coffman? He's still at large, still to be dealt with. Who are you men?"

"So that's the way it works!" Raglan breathed through swollen lips.

"Who are you?" Fane repeated sharply.

Raglan raised his eyes slowly, fighting to bring his senses back into focus. The whole scene had a wavering unreality, and he knew that it was touch and go as to whether he would stay conscious. At that moment a bird cheeped somewhere in a tree, another, and another. This seemed to be a signal, and the forest recovered its normal murmur. The scene sharpened, and Raglan was all right again. Colin Fane's question took form in his mind.

"I'm beginning to wonder," he answered. "I'm supposed to be Thorne Raglan, in the business of finding people who say, 'Let's disappear,' when their debts become headaches. But Thorne Raglan don't . . . doesn't . . . belong here."

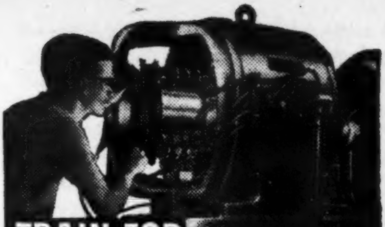
Colin Fane spoke in a soothing voice. "You're shaken, naturally. Aren't we all! Try to concentrate, now. Why are you here, and what do you want?"

The terror began to go, and Raglan felt better. He looked at Sammy Jeeks, and winced at sight of the swollen features which the little man touched with tender fingers. He looked at Craig Marten, whose face was beginning to take on color.

"You didn't get hurt," he said to the boy. "How did you manage it?"

Craig shrugged. He didn't answer. Raglan turned back to Fane. He related the series of events which had led him to Liberty Island.

"I'll admit I had a lucky break," he said. "But I'd have found you sometime. That's what I was hired to do. I guess my job is over. I guess the kid



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and I can go. Come on, Craig, let's be on our way."

"I'm afraid you can't," Fane said. "You can't go."

Raglan frowned. "Why not? I don't want any more of this situation. All I want to do is go away and forget it."

"Your personal wishes aren't very important," Fane said grimly. "You can't leave. You have seen too much."

"I don't get you," Raglan said. "You can't keep us here forever."

Fane smiled. "I don't intend that. Mr. Raglan, I don't want to use personal force. I'm really not ordering you to stay. I'm asking you. You see, when I found that the screen still existed, I set out to find it. I wasted nearly a year and a half in visiting other museums, and hiding under one name and another. I didn't jump to the correct conclusion, as you did, that there had been only one museum when Robert Fane inscribed that letter to his son. Well, I found it finally, and I knew by then that Coffman was also aware of its existence. So a larger problem presented itself."

'Why didn't you just dump it in the ocean?" Raglan asked.

"I didn't dare, Mr. Raglan. I didn't dare assume that responsibility. I don't now. First of all, I had to find out what the screen was and how it worked. There is the possibility always that some such weapon might be needed to protect our planet, or the principles on which our whole system is based. I couldn't destroy it, for there is only one. If it has value, I should give it to the proper authorities."

"But why ring me in on this?" Raglan said. "I don't know anything about it."

"The reason is simple," Fane answered mildly. "If it is decided that the screen should be destroyed, then it becomes vitally necessary that all of us forget that we have ever seen it. Certain legal difficulties could arise, and my friend who is the curator of the museum here could get into trouble for allowing me to take the case, which was labeled a jewel box by my great-grandfather. We need a conference."

"Sure, but aside from us there are Coffman and Chuck. They saw it, too."

"We'll have to decide what to do about them."

Raglan turned to Craig. "You said you wanted a job, kid. If I gave you one, would you forget this?"

Craig Marten's eyes developed a faint glow. "I'll never talk about it, even to you," he said shakily. "I want the job, but I'm a little sick right now."

Raglan laid a hand on his shoulder, spoke to Fane. "I'll make you a bargain, sir."

Fane nodded, waited.

"My job was to find you so that Dave Davenport's estate could be settled and your cousin Phyllis could pay her debts. If you'll come back for that business to be taken care of, so I can get my money, I'll string along on this. Of course," he added casually, "you'll have to put in a good word for me so that I'll get a big bonus. I'm expanding my business, and that takes extra money."

Fane grinned. "You'll go far, young man. I'll—"

He broke off as Sammy hissed a warning through swollen lips. "Comes somebody, chief."

A big voice boomed through the forest. "Ho, Carl!"

Fane took his hand away from the contra-screen case. "All right, Les!" he shouted. "All clear!"

Presently Leslie Carter joined them, and introductions were made. "Sammy, you look like a hero," he said to the little man.

"He is, in a sense," Fane said. "Sammy, would you like to work for me?"

Sammy beamed. There was something almost naked in the happiness which glowed in his battered face. Thorne Raglan swallowed a lump of embarrassment which Sammy's stark emotion brought to his throat.

"I saw Coffman," Carter reported. "He went off in his plane. He came from this direction, so I thought I'd better come see what goes."

They told him, and the agreement between Raglan and Fane was recapitulated.

"I'm really glad," Fane said. "I wanted Herbert in on this. Shall we get started?"

"Oh-oh!" Raglan said. "No, we don't. Uncle Herbert is in on this deal with Coffman."

Fane's expression of shocked disbelief launched Raglan into the tale of Herbert Davenport's apparent underhandedness. When he had finished, Fane was smiling.

"Not Herbert," he said. "He'd be very happy if he knew you suspected him of such nefarious activity. I have no doubt that you're telling the facts, but your interpretation is twisted somewhere."

"I wouldn't say that," Raglan replied stoutly. "I'm not so bad at interpreting facts. I make my living at it."

"I have no doubt of it, young fellow. One thing you will learn, however, is that when you are young and you jump at conclusions. The law of averages will throw in one that is wrong now and then."

"But I know what I'm talking about," Raglan protested. "I could tell by the way he looked at me."

"Even if you should be correct," Fane said, smiling gently, "we are in no danger. After all, we have Sammy on our side."

Sammy looked up, with a great devotion in his round eyes. "Aw," he said with incoherent pleasure. "Aw . . . aw—"

Moment by moment, Thorne Raglan's convictions concerning Herbert Davenport were dissipating. As they sat in the big room cluttered with its curios, Uncle Herbert listened to Colin Fane's astonishing tale with a calm detachment that was highly impressive.

Raglan could keep almost, but not quite, all of his attention on the matter at hand. He was conscious, back in his mind, of the picture which Phyllis Davenport made in the group of men. He retained the subconscious memory of her soft fingers treating his closed eye. True, she had helped to alleviate pain in all who were injured, but he felt that she had been especially tender with him.

Aside from this constant tickling, as it were, of his emotions, he was keenly aware of the discussion, and more and more puzzled by Uncle Herbert.

"Could I get something straight, Uncle Herbert?" he asked into a small silence. He didn't notice that he had called the man uncle, did not see the sharp glance and smile of Phyllis.

"Ask away," Uncle Herbert said in his crisp voice.

"Well," Raglan said with embarrassment, "you've heard my story of what happened to me, and how everything seemed to tie up with you. All of you tell me that Terrel Gay was one of Coffman's men, but what was he doing here? That's what made me so suspicious of you. When I found him here, I knew you were the man behind the whole opposition to me."

"And when he spoke so friendly to you," Uncle Herbert said dryly, "I was suspicious of you. Your subsequent remarks convinced me that you were at least partly mad."

He went on to explain what Gay had wanted, but Raglan still frowned. "But there was some reason why you opposed me in finding Mr. Fane. I wasn't fooled on that. You were against me, all right."

"Wait here. I'll show you." Uncle Herbert went away, returned shortly with a plasticase. He showed Raglan the sword and explained his reasons for wanting an auction. "It was foolish of me to think Phyllis wouldn't let me have this," he said. "But I had said nothing about it, hadn't wanted to, in fact, because of its great value as a collector's item. Then, too, there was a strain between us, and I wasn't thinking clearly. I wanted this sword so badly that I allowed my emotions to distort my knowledge of my niece. You see, this once belonged to a man named Hitler, who was a notorious general. His dramatic gesture of surrender was to break it across his knee."

Raglan smiled ruefully, then brightened. "Well, the facts as I knew 'em pointed to you. I was wrong only because I didn't know all of 'em."

Uncle Herbert smiled, put the case on a table. "I can't blame you for reaching a wrong conclusion, Mr. Raglan." He turned to the others. "We have heard all the pertinent details, I believe. Let's get down to the main questions—what to do with the screen, and what to do about Coffman and, ah, Chuck, I believe you called him."

A soft chime interrupted him. Phyllis moved toward the hall. "I'll see who it is."

"Send them away," Uncle Herbert said. "We must settle this."

"Don't do anything till I get back," she said.

When she came back, she was accompanied. Chuck herded her with a coagulator, with which he menaced the room when she was inside. Charles Coffman entered behind Chuck and surveyed them with burning eyes, with his feline smile of dark triumph.

"Gentlemen," he said. "Please don't move."

"How did you get here?" Leslie Carter inquired.

Coffman did not answer immediately. He gave them a slow, burning glance. Everyone was motionless, for the look in Chuck's eyes was one of calm determination to kill.

"Fools!" Coffman said finally. "Did you think you could outwit me? You dare not go to the authorities with your contra screen. You would not stay on the island. It was simplicity itself to wait until you left, and follow. I am here. Mark this moment well, for the new age begins now, an age of freedom."

Colin Fane made a motion toward the screen, which lay beside him, but froze when Chuck turned the coagulator on him. Coffman's smile took on a touch of evil.

"I was destined for this moment," he said. "I have worked toward this moment since I came across Robert Fane's reference in his autobiography. Not another person had the intelligence to interpret his statement. 'I have disobeyed on two occasions,' he said. It has been there for all to see for two centuries. Yet all were blind. But not I."

He enjoyed his triumph for a few seconds.

"I shall have power," he said. "Power to emancipate the human race from restrictions imposed by fools. Give me the screen. You, Jeeks! Bring it here! Then you shall die, a proper reward for disloyalty."

Sammy Jeeks turned his eyes on each in turn. Colin Fane, hands tense near the screen. Leslie Carter, eyes slitted. Craig Marten, standing at ease on widespread feet. Phyllis, wide-eyed, whitefaced. Herbert Davenport, expressionless. Thorne Raglan, with hands clenched.

Sammy started slowly from his chair. The motion gained momentum and speed. When he was upright, he was moving swiftly into the nozzle of the coagulator.

Raglan moved, too, when he saw Sammy's purpose. He leaped toward Charles Coffman, who was between him and Chuck. The big man jumped away, and as Raglan swerved after him he saw Sammy crumple under the blast from Chuck's weapon.

Raglan did not see the ensuing action, but he heard parts of it. He heard Chuck's scream of agony which gurgled to silence. He dove for Coffman, slipped, fell. As he rolled, he heard another scream, this time from Coffman.

When he was on his feet again, it was all over. Craig Marten held one dripping half of the sword in his hand; Coffman and Chuck lay on the floor, their jugular veins severed, their lives pulsing out on the rug.

Sammy Jeeks, twisted, purpled, was not yet dead. Colin Fane and Leslie Carter knelt beside him.

"I wasn't," Sammy gasped with his last breath, "wasn't scared, chief."

Then he was dead. Raglan blinked moisture away, caught a movement to one side, leaped in time to prevent Phyllis from falling.

A series of movements ran together in Raglan's head, but when they were ended, Phyllis had been removed to a bed, Coffman, Chuck, and Sammy had been taken away, and the five men were met solemnly again. Craig Marten was included in this category, and accepted. He was not a boy any more.

"We must decide quickly," Herbert Davenport said. "The police must be informed. The story they are told will depend on what we do with the screen. If we destroy it, we can tell a tale of attempted murder, and tie it up in a convincing manner to Coffman's outburst . . . was it only yesterday? . . . when Mr. Raglan was hired to find Colin. If we do not, we can tell the truth. I advise that it be destroyed."

"Why?" Colin Fane asked. "Not that I protest necessarily. The question is academic."

"Because," Davenport said, "another man with a twisted lust for power will come along in the future. And another, and another. Suppose that we should turn this screen over to the war department or some other authority. We have no assurance that a member of that body will not, at some indefinite future time, decide that he should rule the universe. Suppose that we hide it, and bury the secret among ourselves. We have no assurance that it would not be found and turned to destructive use, perhaps even by one of us."

"As far as Coffman is concerned,"

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Fane said, "the poor devil is no longer a menace."

"He would never have been a menace if the screen had not been in existence," Davenport said. "He would have been only another harmless psychopath blowing off steam. You see, the screen itself makes every madman a potential ruler."

"What do the rest of you say?" Fane asked.

"I'm with Uncle Herbert," Raglan said.

"And I, though regretfully," Carter said. "It seems a shame that something like this can't be used constructively. But I agree that it's too dangerous."

"What about you, sir?" Fane asked Craig.

Craig's wide eyes moved away from the sword, which had been cleaned and restored to its case. "I . . . I—" he stammered. "I thought I was doing the best thing. I didn't *want* to kill anybody."

They explained to him, brought his mind away from the bloody scene, and he agreed.

"Disposing of it is simple," Fane said. "I have to take Les back to the island. We'll burn the plans here, and dump the screen in a mile or so of water."

"You'll come back," Davenport asked, "to offer evidence if necessary, and to let me settle Dave's estate?" He turned to Raglan. "There is the matter of this young man's fee, also. Will you come back, also, Mr. Raglan? I'm sure there are other reasons than money which will make your future visits welcome and enjoyable."

Raglan flushed, grinned foolishly. He'd be back, all right.

"Thanks," he muttered. "I want to apologize for my wrong opinion of you. Me," he said wryly, "the guy who understands human nature. But who would have picked a crackpot like Coffman as a dangerous man?"

Davenport smiled, pointed to the broken sword. "It has happened before, my boy."

THE END.

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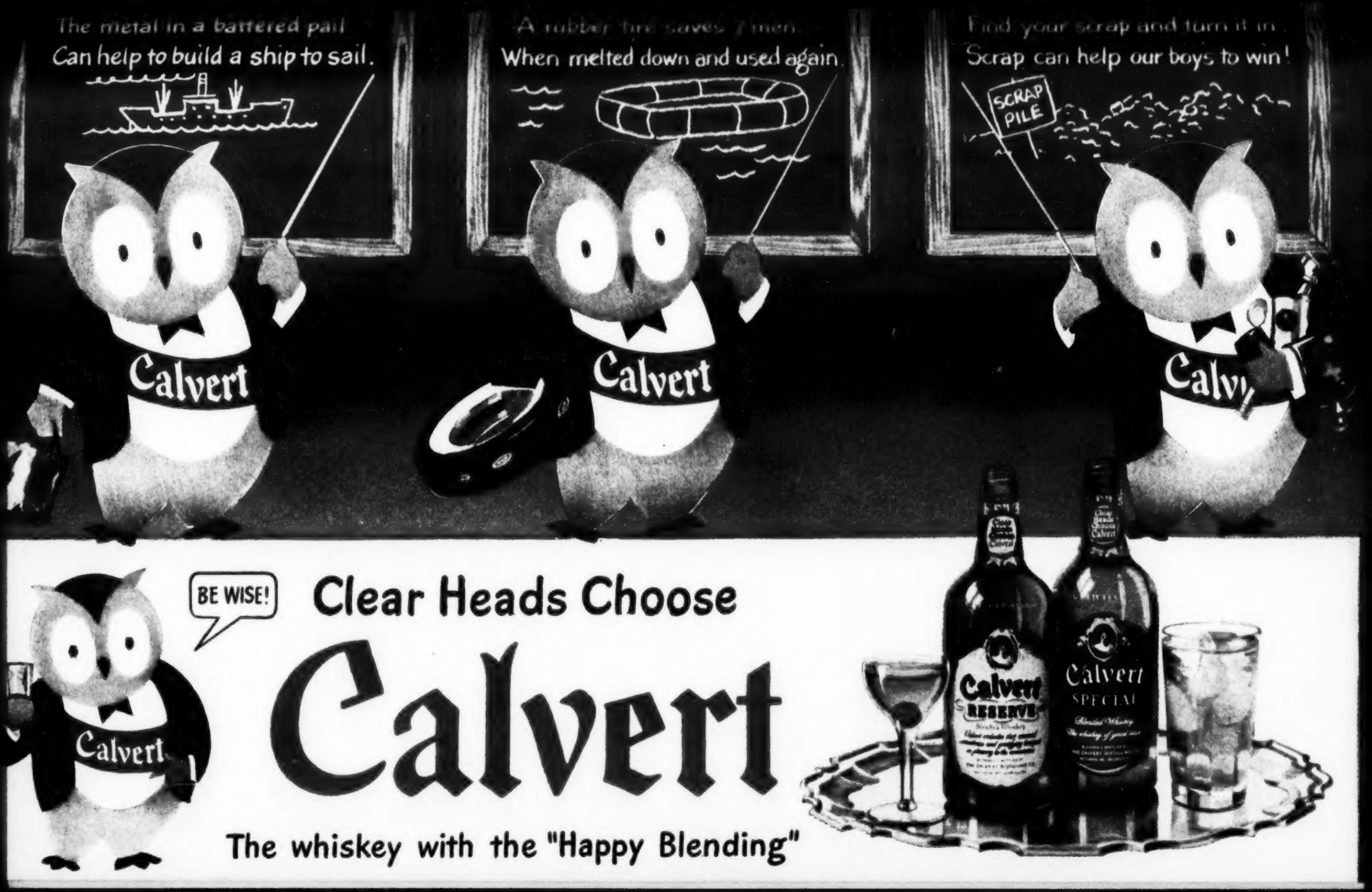
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